




THE STAR MACHINE

JEANINE BASINGER

A KNOPF  BOOK

ALSO BY JEANINE BASINGER

Silent Stars

The “It’s a Wonderful Life” Book

The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre

Anthony Mann

A Woman’s View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930–1960

American Cinema: One Hundred Years of Filmmaking

JEANINE BASINGER

THE
STAR
MACHINE

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For Savannah, my star

It was easy to get used to having a name that wasn't mine and had a better sound. The Veronica was supposed to stand for what was classic in my features and the Lake was supposed to suggest the coolness you got when you looked at them. So things got put together. I went down the assembly line. Dressed by Edith Head. Faced by Wally Westmore. Singing voice dubbed by Martha Mears.... When the hair was over one eye, I became someone else.... I personally have no existence.... My real life, the only one that other people believe in, is the life of the Veronica Lake character.... Has she got any connection with me?...I'm small and suspicious and unsure, and she's tall and poised and thoroughly experienced. The Army respects her, the Navy adores her, the Marines are nuts about her. No branch of the service recognizes me.

—“I, Veronica Lake: Constance Ockelman, Late of Brooklyn,
Tells How She Became Hollywood's Cyclops Cinderella,”
Life magazine, May 17, 1943

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

PART ONE: STARS AND THE FACTORY SYSTEM

The Factory

The Star Machine Process

Product and Type

Malfunctions

PART TWO

PROBLEMS FOR THE SYSTEM: THE HUMAN FACTOR

Disillusionment: Tyrone Power

Disobedience: Lana Turner and Errol Flynn

Defection: Deanna Durbin and Jean Arthur

Disentanglement: Loretta Young, Irene Dunne, Norma Shearer

Detachment: Charles Boyer and William Powell

PART THREE: TESTING THE SYSTEM

Bonuses: Oddities and Character Actors

Retooling for World War II

CONCLUSION: STARDOM WITHOUT THE MACHINE

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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“Movie star” in the old Hollywood was a concept. The person who became one juggled opposing forces: studio domination and ownership versus personal ambition and self-assertion. The resulting friction, some of which has been recorded and much of which has not, was the original idea behind this book. My deepest thanks go to those in the business who were willing to discuss the topic with me openly—the ones who were most perceptive on the subject: Joan Crawford, Betty Grable, Bonita Granville, Raoul Walsh, Frank Capra, and Elia Kazan.

Jeanine Basinger

MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT

INTRODUCTION

The star-making process—like everything else during Hollywood’s studio years—was contradictory, unpredictable, and ambivalent, but none of that slowed the system down. The moviemaking business knew how to be two-faced. In fact, it might be said that the movie business understood that the best way to operate successfully *was* to be two-faced: Hollywood embraced the concept. The studios pinched pennies and spent recklessly. They were cautious but careless. Romantic and practical. Honest and dishonest. Male and female. Howlingly stupid and cunningly shrewd. Nowhere are these contradictions more apparent than in the stories about how Hollywood transformed ordinary men and women into the gods and goddesses known as movie stars. “He’s too short and pasty pale, but my secretary couldn’t take her eyes off him” could inspire a snap decision to “Get him some elevator shoes, dye his hair, and photograph him so no one gets a chance to take their eyes off him.” Although they might later claim “We saw her on a soda fountain stool and she broke our hearts immediately with her unique beauty,” something closer to the truth might have been “Get out there and round up all the good-looking females working in that department store and fix their teeth.” Hollywood was a factory. It operated on the principle that if it dropped a lot of nubile young blondes into its star-making machine, at least *one* of them might come out looking like a heartbreaker. They were gamblers, and some of the biggest long-shot winners in history were the movie stars they created.

Movie stars are fascinating, but I didn’t want to write about them. I wanted to write about the system of star making, about the “star machine” that evolved at the end of the silent era and

“created” movie stars in the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s. The great “star machine” story has been overlooked or oversimplified, but it’s a fascinating tale about a practical business plan that manufactured illusions. I wanted to describe how the machine worked.

It would be nice to report a clear resolution to my story, à la the typical Hollywood movie happy ending. It wasn’t that simple. Any consideration of the star-making system needed to examine individual cases because the business was making movie stars out of real *people*. As much as Hollywood would have loved to ignore the fact that movie stars were human beings, it always ended up dealing with their personal situations, things that couldn’t be predicted or controlled: anger, breakdown, failure, bad behavior, and disappointment. (And that’s *before* they tried to sell the product to the fickle, even more uncontrollable and unpredictable movie audience.) Sometimes a manufactured product turned out perfectly; other times, it blew up in the shopping cart. Describing only how the machine worked couldn’t tell the entire story. Like everything else in Hollywood, the star machine had two faces. Explaining it meant both affirming its process and denying its infallibility. And to do that, I had to write about individual movie stars.

I decided not to write about the era’s legendary figures who have already been written about in many types of books—the Astaires, the Crawfords and Davises, the Coopers and Gables, the Garbos, and the Cary Grants. Some of them weren’t really machine products to begin with, and in retrospect, we can see that their work has transcended their formative years when they were subjected to the ruthless manipulations of the studios. Since I had grown up going to the movies during the 1940s and ’50s, I knew how many non-legendary stars there were back then, and how important some were in their own time—some even more so than today’s “legends.” Although I would have to consider (and refer to) the greats of the past, because they are now our movie star yardsticks, I decided to feature other names, such as Tyrone Power, Deanna Durbin, Ann Sheridan, Dennis Morgan: talents the machine actually *could* (and did) turn into box office draws.

I designed the book in two sections. The first is an objective story (how the star machine, a concrete business plan, worked on a daily basis), and the second is a subjective one (considerations of the people it turned into stars). It's a book about the star business: its failures and malfunctions, its successes, its unexpected bonuses, its astonishing ability to change course and adjust to social and cultural shifts, and its incredible longevity. The concept of "movie star" is still in operation today. Small parts of this book appeared earlier in two out-of-print books of mine, one on Lana Turner and one on the American cinema. Large parts of it were taken from interviews I did years ago with certified stars such as Joan Crawford and Betty Grable. The frankness of these people—their considerable intelligence and down-to-earth insight into what happened to them when they became stars—formed both the inspiration for and the foundation of the book.

PART ONE

STARS AND THE FACTORY SYSTEM



The Star Machine Product: Dorothy Lamour, circa 1939, presented for newspaper and magazine reproduction.

It's a crackpot business that sets out to manufacture a product it can't even define, but that was old Hollywood. Thousands of people in the movie business made a Wizard-of-Oz living, working hidden levers to present an awe-inspiring display on theatre screens: Movie Stars! Hollywood made 'em and sold 'em daily, gamely producing a result for which its creators had no concrete explanation. Sometimes they made films that told the story of their own star-making business, and even then they couldn't say exactly what a movie star was. They just trusted that the audience wouldn't need an explanation because it would believe what it was seeing—star presence—could verify its own existence. “She's got that little something extra,” muses James Mason in 1954's *A Star Is Born*, quoting actress Ellen Terry for credibility. Since he's talking about Judy Garland as he watches her sing “The Man That Got Away,” the point is made. (“She has something!” cries out Lowell Sherman when he spies waitress Constance Bennett in the earlier version of the story, *What Price Hollywood?*) Hollywood just *told* people that “he” or “she” or “it” (let's not forget Rin Tin Tin and Trigger) *had* “that little something extra” and let it go at that. As a definition, it wasn't much, but it was all anyone needed—and there's no arguing with it.

The truth is that nobody—either then or now—can define what a movie star is except by specific example,* but the workaday world of moviemaking never gave up trying to figure it out. As soon as the business realized that moviegoers wanted to see stars, they grappled with trying to find a useful definition for the phenomenon of movie stardom, which is really not like any other kind. Marlon Brando called all their attempts “a lot of frozen monkey vomit.” Adding up the monkey's offerings, it's clear that over the years, Hollywood collected a sensible list of informed observations: A star has exceptional looks. Outstanding talent. A distinctive voice that can easily be recognized and imitated. A set of mannerisms. Palpable sexual appeal. Energy that comes down off the screen. Glamour. Androgyny. Glowing health and radiance. Panache. A single tiny

flaw that mars their perfection, endearing them to ordinary people. Charm. The good luck to be in the right place at the right time (also known as just plain good luck). An emblematic quality that audiences believe is who they really are. The ability to make viewers “know” what they are thinking whenever the camera comes up close. An established type (by which is meant that they could believably play the same role over and over again). A level of comfort in front of the camera. And, of course, “she has something,” the bottom line of which is “it’s something you can’t define.” There’s also the highly self-confident version of “something you can’t define” that is a variation of Justice Potter Stewart’s famous remark about pornography: “I know it when I see it.”

The last one makes sense. “Seeing it” is, in fact, the only reliable definition of stardom. The problem for the business was that audience members didn’t all agree on what they saw. Some said that Greer Garson was a talented actress of ladylike grace and charm, but Pauline Kael called her “one of the most richly syllabled queenly horrors of Hollywood.” For their legions of fans (who still endure), Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald were the believable epitome of musical romance, but for Noël Coward they were “an affair between a mad rocking horse and a rawhide suitcase.”* Hollywood followed majority opinion, promoting the stars for which there was the most consistent audience agreement, while they worked hard to figure out the mystery of why one person (Clark Gable) could be loved by fans and someone who looked just like him (John Carroll) could not. It was Topic A in Hollywood, and studio bosses didn’t discuss it only in isolated boardrooms. They read stars’ mail, quizzed fan clubs, and enlisted the help of movie magazines to create questionnaires about who the public liked and why. Answers from fans almost always boiled down to one thing: a popular movie star was perceived to have a tangible physical presence. “He’s so real. I almost feel I can reach out and touch him” (Gable). “She’s adorable, very warm and real” (Janet Gaynor). “When she’s on screen, you can’t look at anyone else, and you feel you’re right up there with her” (Garbo). “I think he’s just like someone I could know right here in Ohio, and if I needed anything he’d step down

and get it for me” (Van Johnson). In other words, it’s what Elvis Presley’s character in *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) tells his co-star after he unexpectedly kisses her. She sputters about his “cheap tactics,” but he nails down the reason she’ll accept him: “That ain’t tactics, honey. That’s just the beast in me.” Orson Welles told Peter Bogdanovich that this “beast” was best represented by Jimmy Cagney, who passed the real test of the term “star quality” because he could “displace air...be a screen filler.”



Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby, doing what stars do in *High Society*.

Fans confirmed their desire for this tangible presence, telling moviemakers what they responded to in movie stars really *was* something that seemed physical. Great movie stars were “alive” inside the frame. It was their home, their owned space. They were utterly at ease up there (and, sadly enough, often nowhere else).

When Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby, two consummate stars, sing “Did Ya Evah?” in *High Society* (1956), they prove the point. “Did Ya Evah?” was a tough assignment. Sinatra and Crosby had to sing, dance, hit their camera marks, respect the sophisticated Cole Porter lyrics, deliver scripted dialogue, stay within their characters, pretend to be slightly drunk, keep the beat of the orchestra playback, move around a specially designed library set with limited space while following a specific choreography that had to look improvised, and never forget that they were rivals for the audience’s affection, “Frankie” and “Bing.” They had to watch out for each other in more ways than one. (Each was keenly aware of the other’s star power.)

“Did you hear about poor Blanche? She got caught in an avalanche,” sings Sinatra, carefully enunciating Porter’s words. “Game girl,” mutters Crosby, riffing on the lyrics. “She got up and finished fourth.” Sinatra responds with his own ad lib: “I think I’ll dance!” As he wobbles by, Crosby cautions, “Well, don’t hurt yourself.” These men are what stars are, doing what stars do. They seem as if they’re making it up right in front of you. (The illusion of stardom is always the illusion of ease.) Looking at them performing “Did Ya Evah?” is a lesson in star definition: two hardworking professionals are executing a complicated musical assignment in order to look like two amateurs who’re reeling through an accidental musical romp. Fifty years later, after they’re both dead and gone, they are *still* alive inside the frame—*still* making it appear that it’s happening right in front of you, in the moment.

In the “golden era” of Hollywood, filmmakers knew that stardom required personalities like Crosby and Sinatra. Finding such stars was what the studios did. But how did they do it? Was there a formula? No. But there *was* a process. The hard part was that the process cost a great deal of money, and it was fraught with potential disasters. No matter what they did, no matter how smart they were about it, it could go wrong, because no one knew for sure what they were doing.



A successful star trio: Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, stabilized by Dorothy Lamour, in *Road to Zanzibar*.

Moviemakers asked themselves many questions about stardom. Was it luck, an accident of fate? When Alice Faye got appendicitis and had to be quickly replaced in *Down Argentine Way* (1940), her desperate studio (20th Century–Fox) stuck a cute blonde who’d been around town for nearly a decade into her part: Betty Grable. Given a chance by an appendix, Grable succeeded and became even more famous than Faye, lasting for an unprecedented decade at the top of popularity polls. All her life, Grable said her stardom happened because “I was just lucky.” The business asked itself, “Was it only luck?” Or did it require some special role that fit perfectly to what the actor could do? When five-time Olympic gold medal swimmer Johnny Weissmuller was cast as Tarzan, the role gave him a lifetime of fame. Since he was no actor (by his own frank admission), a movie with little dialogue and a lot of swimming fit him perfectly. No Tarzan, no Johnny?

Did actors become big stars because they seemed to incorporate their own opposites? Shirley Temple, that adorable little tot, was also a bossy brat who faked her way forward. If you met a kid like that in real life, you'd want to smack her. Robert Walker seemed shy and innocent, but Hitchcock brought forward some disturbed quality that made him perfect as the evil Bruno in *Strangers on a Train* (1951). Barbara Stanwyck was tough but vulnerable. Tyrone Power was masculine yet feminine. Carole Lombard seemed like a fun pal, but she was the ultimate in sophisticated glamour. Maybe it was that a star had to find the perfect on-screen mate to supply some "other half." As Katharine Hepburn famously said about Astaire and Rogers, "He gives her class and she gives him sex." Was it some perfect co-starring that made magic and solidified the career? Would Flynn have made it without de Havilland? Eddy without MacDonald? Walter Pidgeon without Greer Garson? What could Abbott have been without Costello? Without Dorothy Lamour, the Hope-Crosby *Road* pictures wouldn't have worked as well. On-screen, Hope and Crosby were essentially disrespectful. They mocked the plot, the characters, the audience, and themselves in equal measure. They thumbed their noses at the filmmaking process itself, breaking the fourth wall and making self-referential and topical gags, but Lamour was always present to ground them. (They called her "Momma.") She was beautiful, of course, and her songs broke their tension, but she dealt with Hope and Crosby calmly, in an unflappable manner. She was a gorgeous 1940s Margaret Dumont to leaven their Marxian antics, a center of cheerful gravitas.*

Maybe stardom wasn't about co-stars or other actors at all. Maybe it was a director's keen eye that saw possibilities in an actor that no one else saw—as Josef von Sternberg claimed for his "star-making" skill with Marlene Dietrich? (William Holden said that without director Billy Wilder to shape his acting career, "I would have been Henry Aldrich.") Maybe lighting could make a woman a star (Claudette Colbert), or a costume (Joan Crawford's famous Letty Lynton tea dress and, later on, her shoulder pads and ankle-strapped shoes), a memorable song (Rita Hayworth's "Put the Blame

on Mame”), or an appearance in the movie version of a legendary best seller (Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind*, 1939). Or maybe stardom was linked to some totally unpredictable minor little personal trait? Was it Elvis’s hips or Harlow’s platinum hair? Did Joan Bennett’s dye job (from blond to brunette) change her from just another pretty girl into a seductive movie queen? Gary Cooper was a great kisser. He always did it right, bending his co-star back, holding on, and kissing the devil out of her.* He was a great-looking guy with lots of talent, but was it kissing that put him over? With Gable, was it all in the mustache?

In the end, the business forgot about questions and answers, and just kept its options open, realizing there would always be an unknown, abstract, and unpredictable part to the star-making process. They would always be reconciling opposing elements and taking big chances, treading a fine line between objective business plans and subjective audience response.

“A star was born, not made,” writes W. Robert LaVine in *In a Glamorous Fashion: The Fabulous Years of Hollywood Costume Design*. He was right, but also wrong. “You don’t manufacture stars,” said Joan Crawford (who was in a position to know). “You manufacture toys.” She was wrong, but also right. Studio moguls—men such as Louis B. Mayer, Harry Cohn, Jack Warner, Darryl Zanuck, Sam Goldwyn, et al.—understood this contradiction and faced up to it daily. They succeeded because they accepted that there was no need to define stardom—anything that worked was all the definition they’d need. “She’s got something!” would do just fine. Since they *were* in business, they knew they’d need to control as many things about creating movie stars as possible, but they’d gamble on the rest. The intelligence of the Hollywood businessmen who came to this conclusion—and their astounding nerve—is seldom acknowledged.

And so Hollywood, with its factory-like studio system, cheerfully made a living manufacturing a product it couldn’t define, confident that someone out there (“the little people”) would do it for them—and pay them for the privilege. They busied themselves looking for a Judy Garland to put up on the screen so the audience could find

her and say “She’s got that little something you can’t define but we can recognize when we see it because it’s that little something extra.” They would look for actors and actresses who could project the mysterious “x factor” of stardom. It was a crackpot idea, all right, but against all odds, they made it work because whatever it was, the x factor *was* viewable.

In fact, there are examples of the x factor popping off the screen all over film history. It’s the infrared in the dark of the movie house.* Bette Davis, even in her fake-blonde days, outshines everyone around her in forgotten movies like *So Big* (1932), *Housewife* (1934), and *Ex-Lady* (1933). Jimmy Cagney’s animal magnetism wipes everyone out of the frame even in small parts in *Doorway to Hell* (1930) and *Other Men’s Women* (1931). A young Esther Williams jumps out in an MGM wartime short entitled *Inflation*, which she made after her initial screen test and just before her first feature assignment. She’s a beginner with no acting experience—a swimmer, for heaven’s sake—paired with a terrific actor, Edward Arnold. Arnold plays the devil, tempting Williams to break the rules of rationing and buy herself a fur coat. He gets totally lost when Williams confidently struts around in the coat, flashing her x factor. (Pressed to explain why such an inexperienced swimming champion could be turned into a big box office movie star, Arthur Freed searched hard for reasons. Finally he came up with “She’s cheerful!”†)

A good example of how easy it was for audiences to spot the x factor is demonstrated by Ava Gardner’s 1945 film *She Went to the Races*. Gardner was cast as the second lead, and the star was the lovely Frances Gifford, who was being heavily groomed for the top rank at MGM that year. Gifford had charm, talent, beauty—everything she needed—but she was no Ava Gardner. The audience saw the truth in a revealing scene in which Gifford and the leading man (James Craig) are arguing outside an elevator in a hotel corridor. Suddenly, the elevator doors open and out steps Gardner. She moves into the frame, delivers a line or two in her low, husky voice, and walks off. It’s not much, but it’s everything. The minute

Gardner appears, she takes it all away from both Gifford and Craig. It's not just that she's fabulous looking. So are they. It's not just that she's been carefully costumed and made up. So have they. It's not just the careful lighting, the framing of her medium close-up. No, it's the x factor. Gardner's got something extra—a lot of it, in fact—and it's fully on display. She's got *star* written all over her, and within a year, she was one.

Gardner and others like her proved that nobody really needed to know what the x factor was as long as the fans thought they saw it. It could be happily vague and emotional. Mae West understood. “It isn't what I do,” she explained, “but how I do it. It isn't what I say, but how I say it. And how I look when I do it and say it.”* (All things considered, it's as good an overall definition of movie stardom as anyone's ever come up with.)



Ava Gardner on the brink of stardom, her glamour already secure,
with James Craig in *She Went to the Races*.

One thing *was* concrete, however. Whatever the x factor might be, it had to show up on the screen and it had to be seen by more

than one person. Movie stardom might be undefinable—the business could live with that—but it couldn't be a secret. One other thing was also concrete: It didn't need to be connected in any way to who the star actually was offscreen. Clark Gable, one of the greatest, reached a level so legendary in his lifetime that he could be mythologized inside his own movies. In *The Tall Men* (1955), Gable's nemesis, played by Robert Ryan, speaks what could have been Gable's eulogy as Gable exits the frame: "There goes the only man I ever respected. He's the man every boy thinks he's going to be when he grows up...and wishes he had been when he's an old man." Ryan articulates what the audience saw in Gable. About the real Clark Gable, Ava Gardner said, "If you say, 'Hi ya, Clark,' he's stuck for an answer."*

The reconciliation of the offscreen/on-screen discrepancies like Gable's, as well as the contradictions of the business part of shaping star presences for audiences to "discover," were well known behind the scenes. Louis B. Mayer, head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer during the studio years, was one of the greatest of all the "star makers." (MGM was described as having "more stars than there are in the heavens.") Mayer knew it was good business to let the public feel they were the most important part of the star selection process—that stardom happened without calculation. Speaking to general fans on one of Louella Parsons's weekly radio broadcasts in 1946, Mayer gave all the credit to the audience: "I don't discover stars, Louella. I am only the talent scout who brings the public talent presented in what I think is the proper manner. It's the public who pays its money, chooses, and makes the star." Behind the scenes, Mayer had something different to say. In a 1958 industry article entitled "What Is a Star?" Mayer talked like a businessman. "The idea of a star being born is bush-wah. A star is created, carefully and coldbloodedly, built up from nothing, from nobody...Age, beauty, talent—least of all talent—has nothing to do with it...We could make silk purses out of sow's ears every day in the week." And that is what they did. Or what they tried to do.

This book is about the "star machine" Hollywood created with which to manufacture their silk purses. It's a somewhat scary story

about how a really tough-minded business would do pretty much anything to make money. Lots of money. The dreams, the fantasies, the escapes movie stars brought to the audience—those were the means to the end. “Star power” was, for the film business, just a saleable illusion. Judy Garland’s stardom was ethereal, undefinable...but also quotidian and unglamorous. That something as evanescent, as memorable, as durable as a Garland could be the product of a cut-and-dried business process is truly fascinating—and very mysterious. The “star machine” was the process Hollywood used to invent some Judy Garlands—or at the very least, to be able to recognize one when they saw her even before they knew who or what she was or could be.

* Actor Frederic March didn’t much like Joan Crawford, but asked to define stardom, he mentioned her name and said: “*She* was a star.”

* In talking about movie stardom, it’s important not to confuse the old studio system in the Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s with the one that exists today. “Star” history has to be divided into “then” and “now” because the importance of stardom has diminished over time. The stars of silent film and of the great studio system were gods and goddesses. The public revered them, but they had to earn their stardom. Today anybody’s a star who can get his or her name in front of the credits by negotiating for it. The next-door neighbor in a sitcom is a star. The term is the bottom rung of show business, and to compensate for its devaluation, there is a tarted-up power system of star levels—an upping of wattage. Above “star” is “superstar” and above “superstar” is “megastar.” By this standard, Bogart and Davis and Cooper and Cagney are gigastars. As Baryshnikov said about Fred Astaire, “He’s dancing. The rest of us are doing something else.”

* Lamour’s sense of humor can be seen in *On Our Merry Way* (1948), in which, playing a movie star who does jungle movies (i.e., herself in a spoof of herself), she sings the unforgettable “I’m the Queen of the Hollywood Isles.” Lamour was on top of things. She understood how the business worked and was known as “the girl who never made an enemy.” Today her sarong is in the Smithsonian.

* One of his leading ladies, Laraine Day (*The Story of Dr. Wassell*, 1944), said, “Gary kisses the way Charles Boyer *looks* like he kisses...Well! It was like holding a hand grenade and not being able to get rid of it. I was left breathless.”

* The observable “glow” of potential stardom was present from the very beginning of film history. Clara Bow pops off the screen in her earliest films (such as *Down to the Sea in Ships*

in 1922). She's vivid, alive—a breath of fresh air that is the very definition of “screen presence.” In his first silent film, *The Winning of Barbara Worth* (1926), Gary Cooper shoved even star Ronald Colman aside. Audiences responded to his presence and *Variety* confirmed his charisma, saying he was “a youth who will be heard of on the screen.”

† Williams's good cheer was so tangible that MGM felt comfortable referring to it as a joke. “Who's the picture of health?” sneers Carroll Baker in *Easy to Love* (1953), when she first spots her rival, Williams.

* Dustin Hoffman gave his version of this elusiveness when he described Jimmy Durante: “He couldn't sing, but he sang. He couldn't dance, but he danced. His jokes were corny, but he was hilarious...because he was magical.”

* Stars often had their images ridiculed by peers. Restaurateur Dave Chasen said, “Bogart's a helluva nice guy until 11:30 p.m. After that, he thinks he's Bogart.” Director John Frankenheimer put Kirk Douglas down by sneering, “He's wanted to be Burt Lancaster all his life.”

THE FACTORY



Louis B. Mayer, legendary head of MGM, at his famous curved white desk, surrounded by everything a mogul needs: awards, family photos, libations, and someone to be molded into a star.

The Hollywood studio system of the period encompassing the 1930s through the 1950s doesn't get credit for much of anything, except for destroying the nation's morality, threatening our educational system, discouraging people from reading, turning women into sex symbols, and making fun of minorities. However one feels about all that, credit must be paid to old Hollywood's astonishingly efficient business practices. The moviemaking industry had—and still has—an ability to protect itself from economic disasters (the Depression), exploit historical opportunities (World War II), reinvent itself if needed (as in “movies are bigger than ever” when television threatened), and adapt rapidly

to changing technologies (selling DVDs and streaming trailers onto the Internet). Hollywood has always been efficient.

Most people think that old Hollywood was populated with idiots. The stereotypical mogul is a heavyset man with a big cigar who sits behind an aircraft-carrier-sized desk, shouting to his employees a series of stupid (but amusing) remarks while he makes clear to his newest protégée that if she wants to make it big, she'll have to sleep with him. Or worse. The fact is that in 1939, the year most people think of as the high point of Hollywood's former glory, more than 51 percent of its top echelon were college educated. It's just more fun to talk about ruined artistic projects, sexual exploitation, out-of-control behavior, and a world populated with the "include me out" and "don't say yes until I finish talking" kind of guys. No doubt there *was* plenty of ludicrous action, overweening greed, heavy accents, and bad grammar around in those days, but can old Hollywood match the Enron debacle or the savings-and-loan scandals? No Hollywood mogul—a sharp, hardworking bunch—ever crashed quite the way Martha Stewart or Leona Helmsley crashed. Unless they shot their wives' lovers, they at least kept out of jail, and the distribution of motion pictures into the small towns of America never destroyed local economies the way the arrival of a Wal-Mart store can do today.

Hollywood at work was quite different from the inefficient, money-wasting comedy version we often envision—that crazy place where no one had any idea what was going on and stupid decisions were made on a whim. A movie studio in the so-called golden era was a well-oiled machine with everything needed to make movies right in place on the "studio lot." These lots were huge. Warners had its own ranch. Twentieth Century-Fox sat on 108 acres, and was half a mile wide and nearly a mile long. When Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary on February 10, 1949, Louis B. Mayer proudly said, "Today we have thirty-one modern soundstages, sixty stars, and five lots covering one hundred seventy-six acres." They also had a four-story administration building (air-conditioned long before that was fashionable); a huge warehouse in which to store acres of props, costumes, and furniture; a security

force with nearly fifty officers, a chief, and two plainclothes officers; a dentist's office; a foundry; a commissary that could feed employees around the clock; a prop shop; an electrical plant; a research department to provide any kind of information; a clinic; and back lots created for specific uses. "It was a complete city. You could live there," said actress Janet Leigh, who arrived at MGM in the late 1940s. The studios were positive environments, with well-paid, glamorously employed personnel working together in a sealed-off space that was hard to penetrate. (The studio gate police were legendary.) Inside the studio, employee needs were taken care of by a big-daddy employer that tried to provide them with everything they might need, because it was cost-efficient to do so. Time away from the studio was time lost, which meant money lost. Joseph Mankiewicz, a successful producer-director-writer, said that "you never left the studio for anything. When you were at the studio, you were not only safe from the outside world, you could participate in any part of the outside world you wanted to. If you wanted to register to vote or renew your driver's license, they came on the lot. At Christmastime, the department stores used to bring stuff over to your office to show you."

The old Hollywood was a factory system. (There is nothing like these studios in filmmaking today.) Back then, MGM could complete a full-length motion picture every nine days. In the year 1950 alone, it made 16 cartoons, 12 "Travelogues," 9 "Pete Smith Specialties," 8 "People on Parades," 104 "News of the Days," and released 41 features, among them *Father of the Bride*, *King Solomon's Mines*, *Royal Wedding*, and *The Asphalt Jungle*. The business complexity and efficiency of the studios are easily demonstrated by a look at records kept by any one of the big seven (MGM, Warners, Paramount, Columbia, 20th Century-Fox, RKO, or United Artists). There were departments for everything: an administration department, with all the executives and their assistants; the story department, the art direction department, the makeup department, the cinematography and lighting departments, the sound department, the music department, the casting department, the publicity department, the costume department, the library and research department, the

special effects department, the legal department, the purchasing department, the payroll department—but why go on?

Each of these departments had detailed hiring needs. Director George Cukor said, “I think people don’t understand how a place like MGM needed to be fed, sustained, and organized every day.” All sorts of specialized jobs had to be filled: wig makers, barbers, hairdressers, manicurists, plasterers and builders, musicians, conductors, scorers and copyists, cashiers, cooks, waiters, nutritionists, architects, draftsmen, painters, furniture makers, seamstresses, fitters, stand-ins, script girls, continuity specialists, timers, focus pullers, camera loaders, researchers, as well as the top creative echelons of executives, producers, directors, editors, writers, cinematographers, and actors. These people were employees under contract, drawing regular salaries and reporting to work every morning. Not only was there enough work to keep them all busy every day, but sometimes even more personnel were needed to meet unexpected assignments. What if the studio suddenly needed two hundred Chinese peasants to be on set by 9:00 a.m. the next day? It could happen. The casting office would normally be working only with the roster of actors actually under studio contract, and there wouldn’t be two hundred Chinese anything, much less two hundred extras working for a one-day paycheck. The casting office needed to know not only who they had, but also who every other studio had and who they could get on short notice from the Central Casting Bureau *in case* they needed two hundred extras who could actually look like Chinese peasants. All these people would then have to be hired, signed in, given passes, costumed, made up, directed where to go, organized on set, fed, checked out, and paid. The system would go into high gear, and at 9:00 a.m., when the factory got ready to roll, two hundred Chinese peasants—or reasonable facsimiles thereof—would be standing on the set. The same would hold true if the studio needed a dog star that could untie knots with its teeth, an authentic Lakota-speaking Native American, or two fat men in bathing suits and a polar bear to chase them across an ice floe.*

It took a lot of people to turn out the four hundred to five hundred movies that Hollywood produced each year during its glamour days. And some of those people were movie stars. Like everyone else in these factories, the stars were employees. They were well-paid employees, and they were glamorous employees, but they *were* employees. They, too, had to report to work on time. In his important book *The Hollywood Story*, Joel W. Finler provides a look at how big-name movie stars under contract at MGM were assigned in a typical work week during the summer of 1941. Nelson Eddy and Risë Stevens were rerecording their songs for *The Chocolate Soldier* on Stage One. Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy were in rehearsals for *Woman of the Year* on Stage Three. Lana Turner and Robert Taylor were filming the first scene for *Johnny Eager* on Stage Four. Walter Pidgeon and Rosalind Russell were on Stage Ten working on a movie entitled *Miss Achilles' Heel* (this movie would later have its title changed to *Design for Scandal*). William Powell and Myrna Loy were making *Shadow of a Thin Man* on Stage Sixteen, and Johnny Weissmuller was doing an action-adventure sequence for *Tarzan's Secret Treasure* on Stage Twelve. Poor Greta Garbo was really laboring away. She was being shot doing her famous "Chicka-Choca Rhumba" for *Two-Faced Woman* on Stage Eighteen, under the direction of the no-doubt-dubious George Cukor, and under the lens of the probably bemused cinematographer John Alton. Hedy Lamarr, Charles Coburn, and Robert Young were filming *H. M. Pulham, Esq.* on Stage Twenty-two, and the complicated airplane takeoff scene for *Unholy Partners* (using Edward G. Robinson in the action) was happening on Stage Thirty. In Rehearsal Hall A, Norma Shearer was taking dancing lessons to prepare for her upcoming film *We Were Dancing*, and in Rehearsal Hall B, Eleanor Powell was learning her first tap routine for *I'll Take Manila* (later retitled *Ship Ahoy*). Out on Lot Number Two, exteriors were being filmed for *Steel Cavalry* (later renamed *The Bugle Sounds*) at the small train station set, with stars Wallace Beery and Marjorie Main. Thus, a week at Metro had twenty of the era's biggest stars at work on nine stages, in two rehearsal halls, and

one back lot, the factory system laboring on twelve feature films in a single week.

Clearly, a major part needed on the assembly line of Hollywood's successful manufacturing system was a "movie star." Stars shaded everything around them inside the movie frame, defined the story's meaning, lured viewers into the theatre, sold products off the screen, and had films designed especially for them that could be made rapidly and cheaply. In fact, the entire studio system depended on movie stars and was built on top of them.* Stars were the most precious commodity in the economic system. This was a simple enough concept, but it had one big problem: these stars, these key objects, couldn't just be ordered from a supplier in Peoria or hired in like Chinese peasant extras. Yes, studios could scavenge around in theatre, ballet, opera, and sports looking for existing stars, but the camera is an ornery observer. Theatre stars often did not photograph well. Ballet stars and sports stars couldn't always act, and opera stars could be fat and temperamental. Since the system needed movie stars every day (and lots of them), it did the sensible thing: it manufactured its own. The studios dedicated themselves to creating stars, and they made all kinds of them. There were big-name stars and little-name stars, A-list stars and B-list stars, male stars, female stars, dog stars, child stars, character actor stars, western stars for low-budget westerns, horror film stars for horror films, and, always waiting in the wings to step in when the established stars got too uppity were youngsters under consideration to become the next big stars.† That's why they call old Hollywood "the star system."‡

That system knew how to create movie stars, and it understood star market value, rating it by established business practices that concretely defined "stardom." Nobody was ever *really* a movie star *inside* Hollywood until his or her name went above the title of the movie. The studio—and only the studio—could dub someone "Sir Star" or "Lady Star." If you were a "hopeful" star in the grooming process, it happened only for economic reasons: you'd had a hit movie and received fabulous reviews; the public had consistently

been paying hard cash to see you and were writing in to say they wanted more; you had a unique talent or special quality and everyone decided to take a chance with you. However, even a beginner who was suddenly, magically “starred” in a first movie—Deanna Durbin in *Three Smart Girls* (1936) or Errol Flynn (in what was alleged to be his first film, *Captain Blood*, 1935)—had their names *under* the title. When the business later fully recognized them as real movie stars, their names went up top.

Billing always depicted career trajectory and status; it was an insider’s guidebook to where an actor stood. *The Jungle Princess* in 1936 was Dorothy Lamour’s first “sarong” movie, and she was billed under the title with her two co-stars, Ray Milland and Lynne Overman. The film’s success spawned *Her Jungle Love* in 1938, with the same team. This time the billing read “Dorothy Lamour and Ray Milland in *Her Jungle Love* with Lynne Overman.” In 1942, Lamour was assigned a lackluster movie called *Beyond the Blue Horizon*, which contained several veiled references to her two earlier “sarong” movies. Her billing was “Dorothy Lamour in *Beyond the Blue Horizon* with Richard Denning [her leading man].” By the early 1940s, Lamour had become a star. Her established popularity as a “jungle princess” was being used to boost an unknown (Denning) the studio hoped to build into a star.

Not many made it to the hallowed “star” billing. There were approximately two thousand performers floating around Hollywood by the end of the 1930s, but experts say only about five hundred of these were actually even under contract to one of the seven major studios. A studio like MGM—the biggest—could carry between fifty to one hundred names on its regular payroll, out of which no more than thirty might actually be considered “movie stars.” (This is a very small number considering the high numbers of movies being released each year.*)

This meant a movie star was of primary importance and monetary value to his or her home studio. Thus, the moviemaking factory focused on the creation of movie stars—its lifeblood—and that is why a major element of the old Hollywood was “the star machine.”

The star machine process was not suddenly invented—it evolved. Movies were born, and in turn gave birth to movie stars. The system institutionalized a natural set of circumstances that began in the silent era, when moviegoers discovered they especially liked certain performers—and the movie business discovered the moviegoers' discovery.

At first, actors were nameless, and audiences were satisfied with the new experience of watching moving pictures. By 1910, however, audiences were responding to specific stars. Though moguls such as Adolph Zukor, who founded his Famous Players in 1912, brought theatre actresses such as Sarah Bernhardt into the movies, audiences wanted *movie* stars. And they found the ones they wanted, like Mary Pickford. First, she was simply “the little girl with the curls” until they demanded to know her and she became “Mary Pickford, Movie Star” and ultimately “America’s Sweetheart.” To Pickford has been awarded the title “first movie star,” and the period she represents—approximately 1913 to 1919—parallels the birth of the star system, the industry’s definition of star types, and the business’s understanding that it was the movie star who would sell its products. During these years, the business learned that audiences responded to actors on film as if they *were* the characters they were playing, and that what moviegoers saw was a strange amalgam of the real person, the character he played, and the interaction between the two. Stardom was a two-way street, reflecting performance as well as physical and emotional reality. Studios studied this phenomenon and sought ways to facilitate it through casting, writing, and acting.

By 1927, when sound emerged and drove moviemaking indoors into what is called “the factory system,” the filmmaking business fully realized that movie stars were commodities, and as such, could be manufactured. At the very least, a process—a star machine—could be developed to find potential stars, polish, shape, sell, and sustain them. Why leave the creation of stars to chance? If an audience could find Mary Pickford and turn her into a star, why couldn’t moviemakers shorten the discovery process, increase the numbers of stars they had to sell, and shape the audience’s thinking

by clever casting and salesmanship? It was a logical conclusion that good businessmen would inevitably reach.

By 1930, the star machine was in operation, and its final evolution coincided perfectly with the transition to sound, which required a new type of star: one who could talk and for whom sound would shade type, reduce the ethereal distance of stardom, and increase the naturalism. Movie factories took charge of the star-making process, speeded it up, and ultimately reduced the phenomenon to its essence: even dogs and kids could be stars, if handled correctly. This formalizing of the star phenomenon marks a breaking point between silent stars and those formed by the machine system of the sound era. Great stars from the early years of silent film hadn't been formed by this machine. They were hired by the business for their talent, or their beauty, or their skills (roping, riding), and cast accordingly. When the public responded to them with enthusiasm, they were elevated to the top and became the gods and goddesses of the silent screen. The greatest of those who continued to star after the transition to sound are not machine-made products: Garbo, Chaplin, Gloria Swanson, Janet Gaynor, Norma Shearer. Garbo, Gaynor, and Shearer remained on top as stars of the sound era. Some silent film performers on the brink of stardom moved forward and into the machine process (Joan Crawford, Loretta Young), and some entirely new personalities were located and groomed by the new system in its early, formalized stages (Clark Gable, James Cagney, Bette Davis). From 1930 onward, regardless of experience, actors and actresses understood that being employed in the movies meant being subjected to the star-making machine to some degree for some period. No star escaped it.

The star machine was the daily routine inside a studio. Knowing how much their business depended on movie stars, and knowing how much young actors and actresses (or waitresses and gas jockeys) wanted to become movie stars, the studios created a plan to locate suitable candidates, hire them, fix 'em up, and put 'em on the market. The studios never had any illusions. They knew they were shooting for the moon and at the mercy of a fickle public, temperamental actors, shifting times, and countless other

unpredictable factors. This never slowed them down. They manufactured the product they needed and manipulated their system shamelessly from case to case. They used it, abused it, treated it as religion, or kicked it down the stairs—whatever worked best, fastest, and to the highest degree of profit. For one star, they would follow the rules to the letter. For another they might throw everything to the wind. They rode the whirlwind, but in the most efficient way possible. “Organization is responsible for the success of motion pictures exactly as a machine is responsible for the successful running of a ship,” said Louis B. Mayer.

Hollywood knew how to oil its machine and steer its star ship.

* MGM said that, given one day’s notice, its wardrobe department could outfit one thousand extras in one hour. This efficiency didn’t just apply to actors. Need a vintage car? The research department would let you know exactly how it should look and help locate one for purchase or loan. If not, the foundry and the prop shop would build you one. Anything and everything could and would be obtained—cost-efficient, no excuses, no delays.

* Genres—the types of stories movies sold—were important, but movies were primarily sold through big-name movie stars.

† The word *starlet* was seldom used by professionals inside the studio. It is largely a latter-day construct, meant to be pejorative, although it was sometimes used by the press in the old days. It is not a meaningful term for this book.

‡ The star machine described here existed primarily after sound was established, and the powerful “in-house” movie studios formed—the era known as “the golden era of the studio system,” roughly 1930 to 1960. This system of manufacturing movie stars collapsed when the studios collapsed. During the early 1950s and until approximately 1960, the factories slowly disintegrated, pressured by legal decisions that forced them to divest themselves of their theatre chains and practices of block booking; by competition from foreign films; by labor problems and political problems such as HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee); by the emergence of television; and by their either losing their stars, who defected to control their own careers, or by themselves dropping them because of economic pressures. See the bibliography for suggested readings on this topic and on the history of movie stardom from its silent days forward to the studio system era.

* At the end of the 1940s, MGM called its acting payroll together on a soundstage for the annual studio photograph. Only fifty-eight actors and actresses sat for the picture. These were Metro's "elite." The photo includes not only the people we think of as stars, but also important character actors and supporting players. The photo shows stars like Katharine Hepburn, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Judy Garland, Frank Sinatra, and Spencer Tracy, supporting players like Betty Garrett, and character actors like Jules Munshin and Edmund Gwenn. (We also see Lassie. Yes, folks. A star. With his own star dog dish.) These fifty-eight performers were what the top-ranked studio felt it could afford to keep under contract, available for the fifty-two movies they'd make that year.

THE STAR MACHINE PROCESS



Eleanor Powell, after MGM had made her over.

Why Can't I Be a Movie Star?

It is difficult to see how a substantial segment of the American population can avoid hoping, however feebly, to be among the blessed whom the magic hand of Hollywood plucks from obscurity. Let us take an imaginary Fanny Jones in any town in the United States. Her talents may be dismal, her features ordinary, her intelligence uninspired. Yet how plausible it is for her to muse, "It might happen to me." And why not? Is Fanny Jones freckled? She knows how easily make-up experts hide the freckles of Joan Crawford or Myrna Loy. Is Fanny Jones astigmatic? She knows that Norma Shearer has a squint. Does Fanny Jones lisp? She has read all about how words beginning with "r" are cut out of Kay Francis' scripts. Is Fanny Jones short? They can photograph her on a box. Is she fat? They'll put her on a diet. Is she thin? They'll fatten her up. Can Fanny Jones act? Well! Can Hedy Lamarr? They'll teach her. What fatal blemishes can the Fanny Joneses (or the John Joneses) actually

admit that will bar them from the new Valhalla? They know that wizards will coach them, dress them, raise their eyebrows, straighten their teeth, lift their bust lines, lower their coiffures. Brilliant directors, writers and producers will dedicate themselves solely to the exploitation of their hidden talents.

The point is that these things do happen.

—Leo C. Rosten, *Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers*

It all began with finding the raw material.

In Springfield, Massachusetts, on November 21, 1912, a baby girl named Eleanor Torrey Powell was born. No rockets were launched. Her mom was a housewife, and her dad worked in a hardware store. Scandalmongers later said that little Eleanor's dad had contracted a "social disease" during his wife's pregnancy, and the baby was born prematurely, without fingernails, toenails, or eyebrows. Whether that's true or not hardly matters. What is true is that Dad bunked off when Eleanor was barely two years old. She was told Daddy had "gone to heaven," so it was quite a shock later when he turned up in 1935 with his new wife on his arm during Eleanor's tour in a show called *At Home Abroad*. (Her mother had lied to her to protect her from "the scandal of divorce.")

As a single mother with a daughter to raise, Mrs. Powell had a hard time of it and did whatever it took to earn a respectable living. She boxed bullets at a Smith & Wesson gun factory, worked in a bank, cleaned houses and hotels, and waited tables. Worried about finding friends and social circles for her shy, overly tall, and gawky little girl, Mrs. Powell decided when Eleanor was six years old to enroll her in a local dance school. The fee—one dollar per hour—would prove to be well spent.

Eleanor liked the school. She studied ballet and acrobatic dancing, gaining a focus for her loneliness and shyness and some much-needed self-confidence. She was twelve years old when she was hired by impresario Gus Edwards to dance in his summer show at the Ambassador Hotel in Atlantic City. Twice a week, for a salary of seven dollars per night, Eleanor Powell, wearing burnt-orange

velvet pajamas sewn by her grandmother, did an acrobatic ballet routine to the music of “The Japanese Sandman.” (It had been her dance school recital number.) Audiences loved her, and she loved them. She was invited back the following summer, and by the end of the year began dancing in a nightclub called the Silver Slipper. She was just a kid, barely using makeup onstage, but by the age of fourteen she was earning \$75 a week and was the official breadwinner of her family. Her mother was by her side all the way, and they both already understood that dancing was going to be their ticket to a better life. And Eleanor Powell had not yet started to tap.

Urged by all who saw her dance to go to New York, Powell left school (with her mother’s approval) and headed for the city. Once there, she moved from venue to venue. She danced at Ben Bernie’s Supper Club, in vaudeville, and at private parties. She also went to every Broadway audition listed and was often asked about the current dance craze: Could she tap? Privately, the Powells felt tapping was unworthy of Eleanor’s background in ballet and feared something so seemingly faddish was a waste of time and money. They did it anyway. Eleanor Powell signed up at the Jack Donahue Dance School for ten tap dancing lessons (\$35), and these would be her only formal tap training. The Donahue technique included fastening sandbags around Powell’s waist to keep her feet as close to the ground as possible, thus forcing her to tap loud and hard. She was tall and strong, and she came at it with a vengeance, learning quickly. No less an authority than Fred Astaire would later say of her, “She put ’em down like a man. No ricky-ticky sissy stuff with Ellie. She really knocked out a tap dance in a class by herself.”

Just two months after her seventeenth birthday, on January 9, 1929, Powell, using a tap number for her audition, landed her first real Broadway show, *Follow Thru*, in which she performed a specialty number in the second act. When *Follow Thru* closed the following year, she continued making a solid living dancing for hire in different venues, until she went back to Broadway in *Fine and Dandy*, in September 1930. After that show closed, she did what was by now a safe routine for her: She went back to the clubs and parties until she could find a new show. During 1930–1932, she was

steadily employed, and the Dance Masters of America voted her “the World’s Greatest Feminine Tap Dancer.” She next signed for George White’s *Music Hall Varieties*. By November 1932, when she was twenty years old, she was a true professional with a solid reputation as a hard worker, a top-notch tapper, and a girl who kept her mother close by her side.

George White liked Eleanor Powell’s talent and style. He had been producing a series of Broadway musicals known as *George White’s Scandals* since 1919, and he had signed with Fox Studios in Hollywood to make two movie versions of these shows: *George White’s Scandals* of 1934 and *George White’s Scandals* of 1935. White signed Eleanor Powell for the latter, and she agreed to appear with the understanding—at least in her mind—that this was like all of her working life: a single gig. She expected to return to Broadway when it was over, and in fact, that was what she wanted to do. Her security, she felt, lay in her solidly established patterns of continuous work from supper club to nightclub to vaudeville to party to Broadway show, et cetera.

A weak movie with an old-fashioned plot, *George White’s Scandals* of 1935 starred Alice Faye and James Dunn. Various vaudeville turns by such popular performers as Cliff Edwards and Benny Rubin are intercut into the plot, and one of the turns features young Eleanor Powell. Although she is given a few lines to say after her dance, and she’s invited onto the dance floor by Dunn, who is later seen “romancing” her as they clink champagne glasses on a nightclub date, that’s all there is to it. It’s the dance that counts. Powell’s feature solo number repeats her *George White’s Music Hall Varieties* specialty, a fabulous tap routine for which she wore spangled tights, a backless white shirt, and black bow tie. Except for a cutaway or two, the camera stays with Powell as she spins, she turns, she kicks, and she knocks out an eye-popping back-stepping moon walk, rapidly tapping with all the ease and confidence in the world.

Before Powell could pack and return east, MGM noticed her. Fox Studios and 20th Century had just merged into 20th Century–Fox, and the new studio undertook a reduction of its combined talent,

circulating sample footage of signed players for other studios to consider for purchase. That's how MGM's staff, including Louis B. Mayer, saw Powell's number in the excerpts from *George White's Scandals*.

Already known for its musicals, MGM was on the lookout for song and dance talent, and Eleanor Powell certainly had the latter. The studio was in the planning stages for a movie to shoot in 1935, *Broadway Melody of 1936* ("so new it's a year ahead!"). It was going to showcase several young musical talents—singer Frances Langford, dance team Buddy and Vilma Ebsen, the lovely June Knight, and in a role that would secure his stardom, handsome Robert Taylor, who actually uncorks an acceptable baritone to sing "I've Got a Feeling You're Fooling." There are several different accounts of how Powell got cast in the leading female role. (This is usually the case with movie stars, about whom all false information is, in some fundamental way, true.) It isn't clear who brought her to Mayer's attention (perhaps Arthur Freed, perhaps Sid Silvers) or what the exact plan for her was. Powell biographer Margie Shultz believes that Mayer at first intended for Powell to do only one specialty number. According to Shultz, Powell, who was eager to return to New York and unhappy with the Hollywood atmosphere and her experience in *Scandals*, told Mayer no unless he paid her \$1,000 per week (a very high salary for a newcomer) and created a role for her in the story. Mayer then offered Powell a secondary role (that later went to Una Merkel). Powell countered by raising her salary demand to \$1,250 per week, and to her surprise, Mayer—perhaps following the paradoxical "if she doesn't want me, then I want her" rule of show business—said yes. The money was too good to refuse, and Powell signed her first contract with MGM. It was a short-term contract for three weeks, but at the \$1,250 salary she had demanded. When Powell reported for work, Mayer told her he wanted to test her for the lead. Again, there are various versions of the political shenanigans involved, but however it happened, Eleanor Powell stepped into the leading role,* and the final billing for the movie indicated that MGM had complete faith in her. First came the film's title—*Broadway Melody of 1936*—then, on a level

together, “Jack Benny” to the left and “Eleanor Powell” to the right, and, centered underneath them, “Robert Taylor.” Powell was thus billed under the title alongside Benny and over Taylor.



Eleanor Powell’s first dance in *Broadway Melody* of 1936 presented her in a solo that turned into a trio with co-stars Wilma and Buddy Ebsen.

The proposed shooting schedule of three weeks stretched to three months, as MGM decided to give *Broadway Melody* of 1936 top-notch treatment. They smelled a hit, and they weren’t wrong. The finished film would garner three Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, Best Original Story, and Best Dance Direction.* It was named one of *Film Daily*’s Best Films of the Year, and became one of the top-grossing movies of the 1935–1936 season—and this was a movie that features a vaudeville performer named Robert Wildhack, whose specialty was performing various examples of human snoring (e.g., “acute resuscitation, or the self-awakening variety”).

Eleanor Powell had moved herself onto the lot of the top-ranked musical-making studio in Hollywood when a talented tap dancer was considered an asset. The workings of the Hollywood star machine entered Powell's life, and she was never the same again.

What happened to Eleanor Powell at MGM was what happened to all the young hopeful actors and actresses who came there, whether they could dance or not. The MGM experts coolly assessed her. She was very tall by the star standards of the day, a full five foot six. She was a bit gawky and certainly no actress. Powell had looked okay in *Scandals*, but just okay. She had no inherent glamour. She was not a beautiful girl, and she was never going to be, but she was pretty, really pretty. She could be cast only in musicals, and she couldn't sing. On the other hand, MGM bosses knew they could make her over, give her all the pizzazz she needed, and they could dub her vocals.[†] She would never be any real financial risk for two reasons: They had signed her for only one film, and she could *dance*.

Furthermore, she was already an experienced professional and could be counted on to comply with the demands of the business. She had poise and self-confidence. And when she danced she lit up like a Christmas tree and sizzled, flashing a natural megawatt smile. Knowing they would get their money out of her, MGM moved Powell forward, took a hard look at her, and decided to put her into their star machine.

Powell wore her brown hair short, in a Dutch bob with bangs. The straight and casual style looked stringy and severe on film, and it flopped around when she danced. A special shampoo was prescribed to give it more body. She was ordered to grow it longer, to shoulder length, and hair extensions stood in when necessary. She was given a permanent wave to create wispy little curls around her face, which softened it. Her hair was lightened by a rinse (not a dye) and highlighted to give it shine under the lights. Her part was changed from the side to the middle, giving her face balance, diminishing her strong jaw, and emphasizing her lovely cheekbones. Powell was heavily freckled, so the studio had her undergo a series

of violet-ray treatments that caused skin peeling. Her freckles disappeared, and a dermatologist gave her a daily skin-care treatment that was designed to reduce the size of her pores, since the close-up camera showed everything. Her eyebrows were plucked and given a flattering shape, and a special design for her lip makeup corrected an overly thin lower lip.* Her nails were grown long, shaped, and painted. Her teeth weren't straight, and they looked yellowed on-screen. Since one of her best assets was her natural grin, Powell's teeth were immediately whitened. Three pure white porcelain caps covered the crooked ones.

Despite her years of dancing, she was taken to "posture class" and taught how to stand up straight and square her shoulders—the "MGM female" stance. Her real problem, thought studio bosses, was her legs, which looked knotty, bunched up at the calf and the thigh. She had highly developed short leg muscles—and her overly large knees were already a Broadway joke. Walter Winchell described things as being "as homely as Eleanor Powell's knees." She needed a tough daily regimen to exercise both her long and short muscles to give her legs a smooth look.

Her figure was not voluptuous, but since she was a dancer, no one expected her to be zaftig. She was, however, put on a diet to help her gain the exact twelve pounds (not ten, not fourteen) the studio felt she needed to look attractive in front of the camera. In the meantime, she was padded for a better figure. The wardrobe department made personal foundation garments for her that would mold her hips, flatten her already flat stomach, and uplift her too-small bosom. The famous dress designer Adrian, who created glamour for the women of MGM (Garbo, Crawford, et al.), designed clothes that corrected what the star machine operators had defined as "figure faults." Adrian put Powell in big squared-off collars and dresses with tucks all around her shoulders. When she wore a low neckline, he strategically placed flowers on her bosom to offset the flatness the eye would wander toward. In the area of dance, however, Powell asserted herself. She insisted that when she was doing a number on film that was supposed to be a rehearsal, she should be dressed in honest rehearsal clothes: loose slacks, shorts,

flexible tops. Adrian responded, creating a series of casual outfits that fit her beautifully, that were obviously comfortable, and that she was comfortable wearing. Powell's rehearsal ensembles did much for her image: They gave her a natural quality, a down-to-earth simplicity that her fans loved. Powell's one other stipulation was that her mom would make her dance outfits, and indeed, for the first years of her career, her mother sewed by hand all of Powell's dance costumes (a homey touch the publicity department made much of).

Later, after her success in *Broadway Melody of 1936*, Powell took diction lessons to remove the final traces of her Boston accent, and she studied acting and tried to improve her singing under studio guidance. In the meantime, the studio figured out what to do with Eleanor Powell, an untrained actress, in her first role. She would play an untrained actress, an amateur looking to get started! Furthermore, she could play an untrained actress who pretends part of the time to be a French music hall star with a phony accent. In other words, MGM *covered*. The business was canny, and they knew the audience. So what if Powell seemed to them raw, untrained, amateurish? That was who she was going to *be* for them. With one shrewd move, the studio both forestalled any audience criticism of her playing and closely identified her with them. She's just an ordinary person "like all of you"—except, of course, when she danced.

Fortified by her co-stars, top name Jack Benny in the lead and old pros Una Merkel and Sid Silvers around her, Eleanor Powell made her MGM debut* with the best musicians, costumers, camera people, and makeup artists, and then left town to fulfill her Broadway commitment to appear in another revue, *At Home Abroad*, with Beatrice Lillie and Ethel Waters (directed by Vincente Minnelli). Powell (and her mother) expected to pick up where they had left off, going from revue to revue, show to show, nightclub to nightclub, and now maybe movie to movie. On March 30, 1935, *George White's Scandals of 1935* opened in movie houses, and despite the shortcomings of her looks and costumes, Powell received excellent reviews. On September 20, *Broadway Melody of 1936*

officially opened, and her reviews were sensational: “First, last, and always there is Eleanor Powell...That girl is literally a screen sensation who makes history with this picture. She has no peer in dancing” (*Hollywood Reporter*). “A rangy and likable girl with the most eloquent feet in show business...plays with an engaging candor and straightforward charm” (*New York Times*). “The hoofing...combined with an appealing new personality cinches her cinematic future” (*Variety*). *Hollywood* magazine summed up the general idea: “Ladies and gentlemen, you are about to see a new star born. This little lady has the looks, the figure, and the dancing feet...Ten out of ten must agree she is a wow.”



Eleanor Powell's famous lean-back-and-kick-high stance.

What did the audiences and critics see in *Broadway Melody of 1936*? Eleanor Powell first enters the frame dressed in a plain, somewhat masculine two-piece suit, topped off by a Garboesque brimmed hat. Under the suit jacket is a little white blouse with a small bow—and little bows would become a Powell trademark. She's utterly at ease and projects a bright, sparkly personality. She looks *fresh*. Within minutes, she is up on a rooming-house rooftop performing a tap dance. She does a straightforward solo number to the song "Sing Before Breakfast." Powell would later become famous for her elaborate dance spectacles, but the audience first fell in love with her as she tapped out a charming routine that showed what a great dancer she was. All the MGM magic was at work in understanding Powell's low-key introduction to audiences. Her newly "glorified" self looks terrific. Her costume is a pencil-slim dark dress set off by a white belt, with big white bows on its short sleeves and an enormous, stiff white collar around her neck. As she begins to tap, the dress is revealed to have ingeniously concealed pleats that allow her to move around freely and easily. She looks like a real small-town girl,[†] one with a naïve charm, an innocent and good-natured personality, but whose tap dancing generates a heat that speaks to the audience of fire and passion underneath. (Powell's sex appeal was always in her feet.) Powell later does an elaborate ballet routine with the Albertina Rasch dancers to "You Are My Lucky Star," as well as a tap number to a reprise of the same song. The finale brings out everyone in the cast to beat "Broadway Rhythm" to death, each doing his or her own turn, with the icing on the cake being Powell finishing everything off with a take-charge display of rat-a-tat footwork. Wearing a sparkling top-hat-and-tails ensemble, she twirls rapidly around an Art Deco piano, feet flying, showing off a series of pretzel-like acrobatic backbends and turns, and never forgetting to keep flashing her radiant smile toward the camera. Audiences adored her, and critics went gaga.

MGM bosses wasted no time. During the run of *At Home Abroad*, Eleanor Powell was offered—and signed—a coveted seven-year contract with the Rolls-Royce studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. She

and her mother were never gypsies again. From 1935 to 1945, Eleanor Powell was a star property in Hollywood.

By the end of 1935, MGM had its publicity machine up and running on Powell. All the fan magazines were creating Eleanor Powell stories. Though she had been a success in her first Metro effort, the star machine was going to create an image for her. One of the first and most dramatic was in the December issue of *Photoplay*, an article entitled “The Glorifying of Eleanor Powell (How in Twelve Months She’s Been Transformed from an Ugly Duckling into a Vivid, Radiant Film Beauty).” It’s a piece of clever but cruel salesmanship that illustrates the horror of the star-making process. Having made over Powell successfully, MGM was prepared to capitalize on its own genius. The article openly tells Powell’s new fans that it was MGM who designed the product they were buying. Without denigrating her talent, and by shrewdly finding a way to include her in her own makeover process, the article (shaped by MGM’s publicity flacks) hints in a subtle and unmistakable subtext that any fan/reader could become an Eleanor Powell. The dream of stardom that Hollywood sold was always a dream of promise and possibility...and if anyone doubted it, there were “before” and “after” portraits of Powell for proof. There to be seen is a freckled girl with crooked teeth and bangs (before) and, right alongside, a smooth-faced beauty in lamé, the new star product (after).

According to the *Photoplay* article, Eleanor Powell, the famous “pulsating” tap dancer who had thrilled them in *Broadway Melody of 1936*, was the “acknowledged Ugly Duckling of the Great White Way.” The story’s author, Mary Watkin Reeves, in cooperation with MGM, writes: “Eleanor has given me the complete, intimate details behind...the greatest change I have ever seen in a girl in all my life.” On Broadway, Reeves writes, Powell was “homely, freckle-faced, spindly-legged...she was an unlovely youngster if ever one lived.” In case this seemed too unbelievable—after all, the public had just seen a beautifully turned out, well-dressed, and wholesomely attractive Powell on screen—the article drags in an opinion from Powell’s mother. Herself cooperating with the studio machinery, Mrs. Powell is quoted as saying, “Eleanor wasn’t even a

pretty baby. She was too fat when she was four, too thin when she was eight, and at ten she was a-a-a *problem*. Bashful, awkward, gawky..." The consensus of one and all, including Mom, Eleanor herself, and the voices of Broadway and *Photoplay* magazine was a killer: Eleanor Powell *was* an ugly duckling with a plain face and a disproportioned figure. There naturally would be no future for her in films—but wait! What ho! Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer is here to save the day.

At this point, the article cleverly tacks off in a different direction. The purpose, after all, was to sell the star. Powell is suddenly praised for her dancing and also thrown a bone. "In her own unusual way, she was refreshingly attractive...boisterous...she looked clean-cut and intelligently *nice*...When she sat, she sprawled, but when she danced, she was lightning." Because of her talent, not her beauty, says the story, Eleanor Powell was known as "the Baby of Broadway."

The article then repeats a piece of false information spread by MGM that Powell had made a screen test for Fox that flopped. This was to shift blame for her lackluster physical appearance in *George White's Scandals* of 1935 away from themselves. *Scandals* is never mentioned by name, yet she had just appeared in it in neighborhood theatres a few months earlier. Thus, the role of the rival studio in discovering and developing Eleanor Powell is simply eradicated from her story. The way Powell looked in the "test" is described. "In the eyes of the camera...she was just plain hopeless, without the fundamentals on which an artificial beauty could be built."

Treating *Broadway Melody of 1936* as the film debut that made Powell an "overnight sensation," the magazine story goes on to cleverly and coldly define the actual star machine process that made her over. Every detail is documented. At first, the story says it is Eleanor herself who, seeing her screen test, realizes she must take action if she wishes to be a star. She begins "from the inside out and the top down...to deliberately achieve beauty." Powell is given credit for rethinking her hair, nails, makeup, and the studio is given credit for her health regimen, her new costumes, for creating a special mesh netting to hold her hair in place when she danced, and

for the way she was presented in her “first” movie. For instance, there was one absolute rule for the camera when it looked at Eleanor Powell: Only long shots would be taken of her bare feet. (This, says the article, was because she wore a size six shoe and had dancers’ toes.)

Powell is quoted in the article as commenting on her preparation for stardom. “I haven’t any idea how many people actually had a part in changing me for the screen. There seemed to be everybody from Mr. Mayer on down to my maid making suggestions, trying different things...Now it takes me two hours just to get ready for bed at night...But it’s worth it.” The fans *knew* it was worth it. Just look at her!

This article and others like it were part of an elaborately manufactured profile for Eleanor Powell—and it worked. It would not have worked, however, if the fans had not liked Powell and if she couldn’t dance. As a dancer, she had few, if any, female peers. In tights and tap shoes, she was the girlfriend of the whirling dervish. She was more than worth the money MGM invested in her. Powell emerged from her very first MGM film not only a star, but also a real fan favorite, the “Queen of Taps.” Her next film, *Born to Dance*, was written especially for her. From *George White’s Scandals* in 1935 to 1945, she appeared in thirteen feature films, ten of which starred her. All of her movies except *Scandals* and her last feature, *Sensations of 1945*, were made for the studio that had originally invested in her, MGM.*

Powell had ten years of stardom, which is about par for the average female in the movie business. During her time on top, Metro quickly figured out how to use her, showcase her, and shape her films to both her and their own best advantage. It was not difficult. Just find a simple story, lard it with musical numbers, get her tapping and smiling, and try to end up with a big-bang spectacular production number in which she could come out and tap her butt off, sending everyone home happy. Sometimes Powell’s number was a solo; sometimes she was surrounded by lots of dancing extras, usually men who could toss her around. Sometimes the numbers took place in natural settings, as if she were just tap-

tappin' around town for the fun of it, and sometimes they were allegedly actual numbers for a proscenium stage. Whichever or whatever, Eleanor Powell's dance numbers were spectacular, highly entertaining, and emblematic of their era. *Rosalie* (1937) is typical, containing a variety of routines. Powell does a "natural" little dance in her dorm room among friends; she dresses up like Pierrette and thunder-taps down an elaborate (and dangerous) "staircase" of drums designed in gradually increasing sizes; she disguises herself as a cadet and leads a rhythmic "drill" of young male dancers, ultimately twirling around so fast her cap falls off and her long hair reveals her as a female; and, finally, she puts on a show-stopping wedding gown and stands beside her co-star, Nelson Eddy, for a pseudo-military wedding. Eddy booms out a little "O Promise Me" and then segues into the title song ("Rosalie") while eight pipe organs and a sixty-piece orchestra blast away. (This enormous set was well publicized. "Sixty acres of the MGM lot and twenty-seven cameras and two thousand people were involved." The audience was no doubt dumbstruck by the heady combination of Zeigfield Follies values and American military iconography.)



Eleanor Powell in one of her patented super finale dance numbers with guns and guys, *Born to Dance*.

In *Born to Dance* (1936), Powell is in fine form on the deck of an Art Deco battleship, sliding down a long pole with a happy grin on her face, one arm and one leg extended and held perfectly in place until she hits the ground. Then she taps her way around the big guns at high speed, ending up with a front flip and a snappy close-up salute. (This number was so popular, part of it was recycled in *I Dood It* [1943], a rare thing in old Hollywood.) And these finales include Powell's screen moment for latter-day movie parody: In *Ship Ahoy* she taps out a Morse code SOS to warn the hero about endangerment from spies, all the while she's supposed to be doing her regular nightclub number in the old Ship Cafe. Powell can also be enjoyed throughout the film, of course, often doing simple solos and other times being tricked out in specialty presentations. She does a hotcha hula that irritated Hawaiians, a mock bullfight, and a

hokey cowboy number with spinning lariats she twirled and jumped through. In *Sensations of 1945*, she's a human pinball tapping her way around the machine, lighting it up as she goes while Woody Herman's band blasts away.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer had only one problem in creating properties for Eleanor Powell. Her powerful, low-to-the-ground tap dancing tended to blow any male partner out of the water. She was physically stronger than most of the men available to play opposite her, and she certainly could out-tap everyone. The problem was solved by casting a non-dancer as her love interest. She was paired with Robert Taylor (an actor), Jimmy Stewart (during his own years of star machine development),* Nelson Eddy (a non-dancing singer), and Red Skelton (a comic). Powell's most successful dance partner (other than Buttons the dog or Starry Night the horse) was the incomparable Fred Astaire in *Broadway Melody of 1940*.

Conventional wisdom has it that Astaire and Powell are mismatched. (For some people, Astaire is always mismatched if he isn't with Ginger Rogers.) The truth is that Powell brings Astaire more than a dash of Ginger. Her clean, crisp taps—no faked additional dubbing needed—give him a challenge that he clearly relished. In their underrated tap jitterbug in an Italian restaurant, the “Jukebox Dance,” they are two old pros on top of their game, but the film's highlight, and its most often excerpted number, is their incomparable “Begin the Beguine” finale. Against a black sky studded with stars, Fred and Eleanor flow across a liquid-looking black-mirrored floor, twirling sensuously underneath wispy palms of shimmering lamé, framed by cellophane curtains. In this first section of the number, the last hurrah of 1930s escapist glamour, they are dressed in pure white evening clothes and seem to be literally dancing among the stars. In the second half, they change to more casual clothes. Eleanor leads Fred out onto the floor, flirtatiously looking over her shoulder, beckoning him on with a twinkle in her eye. Their eyes meet, and she seems to be saying, “Come on, baby, let's show 'em what tap dancing is supposed to be.” Astaire never looked happier in a dance number. Reflected in the mirrored background of the set, they let it rip in a boogie version of the song.

In one long take (finally broken near the end), they just tap dance, escalating the intricacy and power of their steps as they go along. At one point, the musical accompaniment drops out, as if the musicians know there's no use trying to keep up. The only sound heard is the full thunder of their tapping feet.

MGM knew the pairing of Astaire and Powell would generate big interest. Although the film was shot in only twenty-seven days, the studio went all out for the "Begin the Beguine" number. Merrill Pye designed what he called "a desert oasis look" for the largest dance set ever constructed until that date (6,500 square feet of mirrored floor). It took eight weeks to build, contained thirty-foot mirrors, and required more than ten thousand lightbulbs to simulate stars. Dance director Bobby Connolly worked harmoniously with the two dancers, and the result is both beautiful and exciting. The film was heavily promoted ("It's as big as Broadway and twice as gay!"* and "A mighty musical triumph!"). Audiences still missed Ginger, however, and Powell and Astaire were never reteamed. Privately, Astaire always paid tribute to Eleanor Powell, a real professional and a perfectionist like him. Although it's often said they were "too much alike" to be interesting as a pair, it's possible to see them as a perfectly matched couple of great tap dancers who enjoyed mutual affection and respect.



Fred Astaire and Eleanor Powell, from their tap-dancing tour de force to “Begin the Beguine” in *Broadway Melody of 1940*.

Seen today, Eleanor Powell is astonishingly contemporary. Because her wardrobe is always chic and streamlined, she looks modern. She has a straightforward, no-nonsense style. Her dancing is authoritative, almost masculine. She *owns* tap dancing. The characters she plays are self-confident and poised, and success comes easily to them or is already established when the movie opens. She is never undone by romance. As an actress, she was without guile. She couldn't act and she doesn't try; she just comes out and *presents* her character, as if acting were the same as dancing: “Now I'll do my routine for you.” She seems always to understand what she was good at and what fans wanted her to do. In the long

run, she became her own genre: outstanding female tap dancer.* She was (with few exceptions) in charge of choreographing her own dance numbers, and she could be tough-minded about what she would and would not do.

Her movie career was mostly one long specialty number, with her plots and co-stars thrown in around her as an excuse for her dancing. In this regard, she was like a Sonja Henie or an Esther Williams—hired for the thing she could do that was athletic and amazing—and Powell's tap dancing was nothing short of amazing. Her solos were a combination of tap, acrobatics, and ballet, all executed with great strength and drive. To watch her perform one of her own original signature steps—she kicks her leg up in the air right alongside her chin, then bends backward all the way to the floor—is to wonder if she's human. She would do this astonishing step once, turn to the other side and repeat it, then turn back, and yet back again for four executions of a movement that required both pretzel-like flexibility and iron strength. And she did it slowly, deliberately, holding each section of the move, showing off her strength, balance, and control—every part of her staying rock solid and steady. Other dancers could fling themselves around; no one but Powell could hold like that.

It was inevitable that, just as ice-skating numbers and swimming numbers lost favor, Powell's style of pumped-up and dramatically mounted dancing would pass out of favor, too. Powell didn't seem to mind. As the 1940s opened, her films began to be about someone other than her. In *Lady Be Good* (1941), Ann Sothorn was the film's key character, with Powell more or less relegated to glamorous sidekick. In *I Dood It* and *Ship Ahoy*, she was the musical background in support of the studio buildup for her leading man, comic Red Skelton. Many of the films announced for her were never made. There was to be a *Broadway Melody of 1944* to co-star her with Gene Kelly that never happened. There was a rumored role in *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) that never materialized, and an unreleased film, *The Great Morgan*.† Most of all, there was Glenn Ford. Powell had ended a long-term relationship with art director Merrill Pye in 1941, and

met Ford in early 1942. His career was beginning and was in no way equal to hers at that point. Powell was thirty years old and had often said, “If I could meet that someone, I’d give up my career, right here and now. I’d never make another picture.”

Eleanor Powell spent time entertaining the troops, considering offers, and making her last feature. In June 1943, she quietly left MGM with nine months left on her contract. The official statement about her departure was that she wanted more time to entertain troops during the war effort. *Screenland* magazine claimed she had turned down a renewal of her seven-year contract with MGM, but whether that was true was never confirmed. She kept her plan to retire after the war. On October 23, 1943, she married Glenn Ford.* In June 1944, her last feature, *Sensations of 1945*, was released, and in February 1945, her only child, a son named Peter, was born. For all practical purposes, her movie career was over, and she devoted the rest of her life to religious work, winning five Emmys for her show *Faith of Our Children*, and becoming a minister in the Unity Church. Although she did return to the nightclub circuit with great success,[†] and agreed to a specialty number in the 1950 *Duchess of Idaho* for MGM, Powell never seemed to regret leaving her stardom behind. She had had the best of it, and MGM had had the best of her. Eleanor Powell really was born to dance. (Eleanor Powell died on February 11, 1982.)

Eleanor Powell’s story is a classic example of the Hollywood star machine process. Hers is the version in which someone with an amazing single talent was scooped up, transformed, and put on the market with relative ease, creating a fiction known as the “overnight sensation.” She had already made one, possibly two movies, before she was a hit, and she had been a working professional since childhood. That truth, however, was nowhere near as interesting as the belief that she stepped into fame overnight. Not only was that concept more appealing and dramatic, but it also held out a sweet promise to all those in the audience who, like little Eleanor Powell once had, were plunking down a buck a week for tap-dancing lessons.

Hollywood never believed in the overnight sensation, or even the “star is born” myth. But if it sold tickets to let an audience believe that Eleanor Powell, the Queen of Taps, was an overnight sensation, that, folks, was showbiz.

WHAT MGM DID TO TRANSFORM Eleanor Powell was in no way unique. The product was special, not the process. Her “star is born” story illustrates the star machine process every studio in town was using. As it had with Eleanor Powell, it always began with finding the talent. To do this, the studios hired hundreds of “talent scouts” and studio employees to travel around America and much of Europe looking for young men and women who might be turned into movie stars.* Every studio was willing to look at any possibility. An enormous amount of money went into these searches. No play—on Broadway or on tour—went unattended and no vaudeville act unseen. No nightclub act was skipped, no radio broadcast was unheard. If a pretty young girl won the Miss Potato Pancake of 1932 title, she was offered a ticket to Hollywood and a screen test. If a handsome young man with a good body won a diving contest, someone spotted him and gave him *his* ticket. No waitress, no lifeguard, no elevator operator was unscrutinized. Potential stars were “discovered” everywhere: on the covers of magazines, in fashion shows, at the Olympics, and—as legend would have it—sitting on drugstore soda-fountain stools. “The thing that astounded me,” said Ray Bolger, “was that they bought people. It was like you would go into a grocery store and say, ‘Give me four comics and three toe dancers, and I want five girls and five male singers. I want nineteen character actors and I want some unique personalities.’”

Every studio was looking for the same thing—someone it could turn into a *real* movie star. When they thought they had come across such people, they grabbed them up and tried them out, just as they had with Eleanor Powell. For instance, a young girl named Lucille Le Sueur was put under contract by MGM in late 1924. She was about eighteen years old; no one really knows her exact age. She

was five foot three and a half inches tall, a natural redhead, haphazardly educated, relatively inexperienced, and freckled. She was going to be paid a hefty (for the times, and in her mind) \$75 per week but, under the terms of her contract, would have to provide her own underwear and silk stockings. When she boarded a train for Hollywood on New Year's Day 1925, she was the longest of long shots, just another girl with a passion to succeed, but she turned out to be one of the best investments the studio ever made, paying off for well over a decade and at top dollar. "Joan Crawford," as she was renamed, earned her keep. And then some. "If you want to see the girl next door," she later said, "go next door."

In conducting their searches, the studios were usually highly astute and far more sensible than anyone might think. They wanted young people who were beautiful and talented, of course, but also pliant, flexible, and, above all, obedient. With the amount of money it would take to promote, publicize, and turn out a movie star, studios didn't want any nasty surprises down the road. "Nasty surprises" were not what people today might think. Crazy mothers and fathers who had disappeared? No problem. Shady reputations, unusual sexual practices, even alcoholism? Relatives in prison? The studios could—and did—handle all those. They knew how to shut up and cover up. Nobody cared about bad behavior as long as it didn't make the newspapers. What they did care about was money. "Nasty surprises" meant that initial investments weren't going to pay off. Maybe the star was going to be lazy, sickly, neurotic, or, worst of all, disobedient and ungrateful. Anything that threatened the financial investment needed to be rooted out before it could become a nasty surprise.

Once a hopeful was located, he or she was going to undergo a rigorous process of preparation and evaluation. As in the case of Eleanor Powell, the studios weren't seeking perfection; they didn't need to. For inside the studio system was the star-making machine, with its sharply honed "evaluation," "development," and "instruction" that would create perfection—or at least something that could be made to look like it—on film.

The first steps in the star machine process usually involved two key events: a screen test and a thorough physical analysis. Unless, like Powell, the performer had prior footage, the test was imperative, because it showed studio bosses how potential stars would photograph *before* anything was done to “fix them up.” There are many amusing (and probably apocryphal) stories about the reactions the business had to some of these tests. They are mostly based on rumors that can never be verified, but they *are* fun. We’ve all heard about Fred Astaire’s, after which an executive was supposed to have commented, “Can’t act. Can’t sing. Balding. Can dance a little.” (Well, Astaire was, I suppose, balding.) Of Bette Davis, it was said she had “less sex appeal than Slim Summerville.” Tyrone Power’s eyebrows made him look like “an ape,” and Alan Ladd was deemed “too short to stack up.” (He was, but it turned out not to matter when they found him an equally small co-star, Veronica Lake.) Clark Gable (“ears too big”) was allegedly costumed for his test in a Native American chief’s war bonnet (or a Polynesian sarong with a gardenia behind his ear, depending on who’s telling the tale). Most first-test legends assert that “Nobody saw the magic but the secretary” or “Nobody saw it but the studio head’s wife” or “Nobody saw it but the butler.” It was hard to see, and it sometimes took more than the screen test to figure it out. But the machine process started with the screen test simply because people don’t always look on film the way they look in real life. Some people really respond to the presence of a camera and suddenly look twice as beautiful in front of it. Short people can look tall. Skinny people can look curvaceous. On the other hand, a stunningly beautiful creature could photograph badly, looking flat-faced and deadly cold. Studio bosses wanted to get a sense of who the person was going to be *on film*.

Screen tests are a largely unexplored area of movie history. Many have disappeared, because test film stock was reused.* Although some exist, they are seldom seen, and only the ones made by individuals who became big stars have been made public. Screen tests were of three types: *scenes*, in which an actor was tested for a specific role, usually performing opposite another actor being tested

or an unknown; *wardrobe*, in which an actor already cast in a part modeled the clothes designed for the role; and the all-important “*personality*” test, in which the newcomer was photographed while off-screen “testers” asked questions designed to relax the performer and reveal the natural personality. These last tests were especially important to newcomers who were often untrained actors and whose “scenes” could be disasters.[†] A “personality test” gave studios a better sense of what someone might become on film. Potential stars were asked to “walk around,” “light a cigarette,” or “stand up and sit down.” The camera could move in for close-ups to catch the performer off-guard, elicit a natural smile, or reveal any facial tics or mannerisms.

Unless the objective was “to find the right person to play Scarlett O’Hara,” the most important screen test was always the personality test. The original personality test exists for a young and radiant Ingrid Bergman. She is a magical presence on film, lighting up the screen. If it were always as easy to see “star” as it must have been with her, the business would have been simple, and if more screen tests were as heart-stopping as hers, more would have been saved.[‡]

After the screen testing, the newcomer would be looked over at closer range by the costuming, makeup, and hairstyling departments. If the results of the screen test were “not bad, maybe... can you do something with the hairline?” the departments were assigned to work on a specific problem. If the consensus had been “this person is dynamite, let’s get him/her looking as good as possible,” studio teams began at once to make the naturally beautiful look even better. If the diagnosis was “great except for the moles,” there was work to be done.

In any event, the studio next took the new discovery forward into a “looking over” period that probably had no parallel outside a tenth-century Arab slave-trading market. It was “fix-’em-up” time. As had been done with Eleanor Powell, young “properties” were brought into a studio room where they were carefully measured for height, bust size, shoe size, shoulder width, and so on. They were weighed and warned what weight they would have to reach and/or

maintain to look good on camera. Under intense lights and under the scrutiny of magnifying glasses, they sat in chairs as several men in white coats examined them, openly discussing any problems. (A presentation of this process appears in both the 1937 and 1954 versions of *A Star Is Born*.) Joan Crawford always talked privately about how she never really knew how she had escaped this initial review, managing to get her freckles past the experts. (She escaped the violet-ray treatments forced on Powell. At home, Crawford wore no makeup and allowed her red spots to show. Sometimes—after she became a star—she was dramatically photographed to reveal them, but most people never realized she was freckled.)

Based on results of the “look over,” the studio devised a plan. Most of the “work” was done with cosmetics, proper lighting, clever photography, and strategic fashions. Height could be enhanced with platform shoes, proper camera angles, and a pygmy co-star, or shoulders broadened with pads and waists cinched in with girdles. However, Hollywood was also the original nip/tuck factory, a pioneer in cosmetic surgery and dental work. Was there a handsome guy (Clark Gable) whose ears stuck out? They could be taped back, or even surgically corrected. Were there ethereal beauties who smiled and showed teeth that weren’t straight? (Besides Powell, Joan Crawford, Alice Faye, Greer Garson, and Lucille Ball all needed dental work.) A studio dentist was on salary and waiting with the braces and the caps. And for noses that were too big, too long, too ethnic, too “anything”—from bumps in the middle to strange tips at the end—those were a piece of cake. At the end of her evaluation, the beautiful Maureen O’Hara was inexplicably told to have her nose bobbed. “They said it was too big, which it is,” she wrote in her autobiography, “but I like it anyway.” She kept it and became a star.



A simulation of the star make-over ... “which eyebrow looks best?”
Janet Gaynor playing Esther Blodgett on her way to becoming Vicki
Lester in the 1937 *A Star Is Born*.

Hollywood had started using cosmetic surgery as early as the 1920s. For obvious reasons, not a lot of information about who got what done was left lying around, and few volunteered to tell what they had done and when. Silent stars such as Valentino, Bebe Daniels, and Carmel Myers were said to have had surgery—Valentino on his ears, the females on their noses. Hollywood could and did fix, and face-lifts for aging stars became increasingly popular as techniques were perfected. On the whole, however, most of the beautiful people brought out to Hollywood didn’t need much done to them that couldn’t be accomplished through less drastic means. They *were* beautiful people, but many small things were done to change their looks or to make them more photogenic. It is well known, for example, because she always told everyone, that Lana Turner’s eyebrows were shaved off by the makeup department when she appeared as an Asian in *The Adventures of Marco Polo* (1938)—and they never grew back. Turner’s eyebrows, from 1937

onward, were a product of the drawing pencil. Margaret Sullavan underwent a major makeover in order to photograph properly for the camera. She was lovely to look at, with a true radiance and major talent, but she didn't photograph well. Her face was deemed "asymmetrical" and her eyebrows had to be shaved so that makeup could raise the line of her right eyebrow. Her mouth slanted downward, so her lips had their corners raised by careful application of lipstick. Makeup was also used to decrease the distance between her mouth and nose.

Rita Hayworth has always been known to have had her hair dyed and her hairline raised through electrolysis to make her look less Latin. Bob Schiffer, a famous Hollywood makeup man who worked with Hayworth during most of her career, never said Hayworth was anything less than a glorious beauty, but he gave interviews about how minor adjustments needed to be made for her to look as luscious as she did. "One eye was a little smaller than the other," said Schiffer about Hayworth, "so I used to take a false eyelash and place it at an angle, then glue her own eyelash to it, just to even her eyes out."



The making of a movie star ... from Margarita Cansino, 20th Century–Fox player ... to Rita Hayworth, potential superstar: new name, new hairline, new shape, new hair color, new makeup, and new stance: up and on her toes.



Greer Garson was put through the wringer by the makeup department when she was brought over from England in December 1937. She had just turned thirty-three, an age that made the experts nervous. Her adventures in the star machine are well documented and described in *A Rose for Mrs. Miniver: The Life of Greer Garson*, by Michael Troyan. He quotes Garson as having told a fan magazine that “Studio experts teach you to streamline yourself...(my eyebrows, for example, resembled fishhooks when I came here and are now sleekly arched half moons).” In other words, Garson’s eyebrows had been reshaped and MGM planted a piece about it in a magazine in the same way they had presented Eleanor Powell’s makeover from ugly duckling to glamorous dancer.

Because of an unhappy experience with a screen test in England before she came to America, Garson was reluctant to enter movies. (Troyan quotes her as having complained, “They just can’t photograph me. My face is all wrong for the screen.”) Yet after MGM worked on her, America’s first sight of Garson was in the 1939 hit movie *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, in which she played the rather small role of Mr. Chips’s lovely wife who tragically dies in childbirth. Garson’s face is first seen in the film in close-up as a mountaintop fog lifts around her, and she is breathtaking. MGM had “fixed her up” but good. Her worries, however, were not ungrounded. Caught unprepared by her enormous success in her first role, MGM rushed Garson into a terrible film, *Remember?* (1939), with Robert Taylor.* The makeup department evidently forgot to “remember” what it had learned about Garson, and her fears were fully realized. Her face looks flat and broad, and her fabulous cheekbones—so fully on display for the rest of her career—are not lit to give her face the planes it needs. Her makeup is wrong and her hairstyle unbecoming, its flattop quality making her forehead look too low, which it wasn’t. Although she wears clothes that are chic, they don’t give her any personal style. They are standard “MGM clothes”—and others knew how to wear them better. (Garson was never a clotheshorse.) *Remember?* shows what could go wrong for a beautiful woman in front of a film camera. If *Remember?* had been Garson’s first movie, we might never have heard from her again.

Hollywood worked hard to invent and develop new tools for makeup, and it was never stingy with the results. Hollywood’s makeup tips appeared in movie magazines, newspapers, and general-readership magazines. Women who wanted to look like movie stars were told to paint their eyesockets with Vaseline, which would make them look “aglow” and “very sweet.” Discolored teeth could be painted with enamel. Eyebrows could be shaved and reshaped. The Max Factor Corporation sold their Hollywood products to the general public. “Glamour for you, too!” screamed an ad for Max Factor PanCake makeup. Max Factor proudly listed their accomplishments in a trade ad in the *Hollywood Reporter* of May 10, 1934: the invention of a makeup to give natural tone to the skin

(1920), a perspiration-proof body makeup (1923), “underwater” makeup (1926), Panchromatic makeup (for use in color photography, 1928), sunburn makeup (1929), and the one they were currently promoting in 1934, “Satin Smooth,” which was supposed to be full of “delicate tones that photograph beautifully.”

Makeovers were sometimes not about cosmetics. If a fabulous dancer who couldn’t sing a note was brought into the system, the dubbing department had five suitable voices waiting—they picked the one that sounded the closest to the dancer’s speaking voice. This had been done for Eleanor Powell. If an actor was a stutterer or a Hungarian whose English was incomprehensible, the diction department went to work. Everything and anything could be fixed, even awkward personal problems. Did a hot comic have a wife without talent who also wanted to be in the movies? Not a problem for a powerful studio: She could be stuck into minor roles to shut her up. Studios bought off current employers, former wives and husbands, jealous relatives, untalented siblings, anybody they had to. They paid for anything that could be considered a reasonable expense. Ready and willing to tackle anything, the machine could polish, shellac, trim, tuck, reshape, repress, and get rid of unwanted past baggage.

The first early assessments from the star machine covered everything about a hopeful, and they were detailed and ruthless. Those who conducted them saw these assessments as helpful to the potential stars, rather than cruel. After all, wasn’t it going to make them rich and famous? The difference between our latter-day perception of stardom (“Ah, the mystery of it all!”) or our romantic ideas of persona (“He was born to play a gentleman”) and this hard-nosed routine evaluation process is startling, even terrifying. In the Wesleyan Cinema Archives exists Clint Eastwood’s “report card” from his early days as a contract player at Universal. Eastwood is ruthlessly assessed in the categories of attendance, acting (“voice work must improve...projection not good”), diction (“seems completely green to the whole business”), dancing, singing, horseback riding (“in beginner’s class”), and gym. The general comment, after Eastwood had been taking these classes for one

month, was “An extremely likable boy who has gained admiration from his associates by his good nature and eagerness to learn.” This document is dated June 1, 1954. Also in the archive is another one dated October 25, 1955: the payroll termination notice for Clint Eastwood, the last day of his contract, as instructed by an interoffice communication dated September 22, 1955, which tersely reads, “Please be advised that we will not exercise our option on Clint Eastwood.” He might be “an extremely likable boy,” but they saw no dollar signs in him.

Even actors who had already made a mark were subjected to intense scrutiny. In the same archive exists David O. Selznick’s specific wishes regarding the handling of Ingrid Bergman’s screen test for the role of Maria in Paramount’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943). Even though Bergman had reached a high level of success in Swedish films and had triumphed in America as star of *Intermezzo: A Love Story* (1939), *Adam Had Four Sons*, *Rage in Heaven*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in 1941, and was preparing to appear in *Casablanca* (1943), she was treated by Selznick as a possibly flawed product who needed careful handling to be “sold” to Paramount. Dated July 28, 1942, and entitled “Instructions from Mr. Selznick Re Miss Ingrid Bergman’s Paramount Test (for *For Whom the Bell Tolls*),” the document has fifteen detailed items. For instance, “The most important thing is the pants that she [Bergman] will wear, as Mr. DeSylva has some strange idea about her being too heavy in the hips; therefore see that the pants are properly tailored and not large enough for Marie Dressler.” The instructions include further details on makeup, Bergman’s eyebrows, lipstick, eyelashes, and hair. (“Miss Bergman” got the part and an Oscar nomination for it, with no mention of her hips being wrong for the job.)

Once a performer had survived the assessment period, he or she was labeled “a potential useful property” and offered a short-term studio contract at a salary that was good for the times but not overwhelming by Hollywood standards. These were called “step” or “option” contracts, with “step” being the optimistic side (“step by step” you’ll go forward) and “option” the pessimistic (we have an “option” to drop you if we don’t like the way you’re going). There

were reassessment periods every six months, so if youngsters weren't working hard, showed no real ability, or didn't seem to fit the studio's roster, they could be dropped. No discussion. If the contractee was doing well, however, the contract would be renewed for another six months, usually with a small increase in salary.

After a potential star was signed to a step contract, the star machine went into high gear. Jargon inside the factory referred to this as "the buildup." If a performer came to Hollywood already a name, as Eleanor Powell had, he or she didn't always need this buildup. However, the typical actor or actress being groomed for stardom underwent this detailed business process, which was identical for everyone. Two things would happen next. First, the employees began to be used (and that was the operative word) in bit parts, walk-ons, and small roles that gave them a minimum of dialogue. If they did well, they were given larger speaking roles and one or two key featured roles. If the public noticed them, reviews singled them out, and/or the studio saw potential, they were renewed again. Then the system *really* went to work.

During this period of bit casting, the newcomer would be turned over to the studio publicity department. Hollywood studio publicity departments, key to the star-building process, were huge. At the top was a publicity director, who assigned stories and personally handled anything messy that turned up. (Some were famous inside the business, most notably Howard Strickling at MGM, Russell Birdwell at Selznick International Pictures, and Harry Brand, who worked for Darryl Zanuck.* Their large staffs—MGM's department had more than forty people—included unit reporters, publicists, the still-photography department, the advertising department, the famous portrait photographers like George Hurrell, fan magazine liaisons, and the fan mail office.† There was an office to create the previews of coming attractions, generate magazine articles, news items, and merchandising tie-ins; people to solicit product testimonials and endorsements; and specialists to do fashion layouts, to arrange personal appearances and radio assignments, and to design all the movie ads and posters. Strickling said, "We did

everything for them. There were no agents, personal press agents, business managers, or answering services in those days. All these services were furnished by the MGM publicity department.” The business was also adept at using the other media—magazines, newspapers, and radio—to promote its product, and it worked with fashion specialists and other franchises to find ways to use its stars and promote up-and-coming hopefuls. There were also publicity flacks outside the studios, as well as regular newsmen and -women, columnists, and fan magazine personnel. All of these people had to cooperate and agree to endorse new stars and the created fantasy about them. To achieve this much-needed press cooperation, it was essential for the actors or actresses to fully accept and carry out what the studio told them to do.



With the help of the studio head, and subject to his approval, the director of publicity would be instructed to invent who the star was. This was an imaginative, somewhat whimsical, often hilarious, and definitely ripe-for-satire process. These things usually happened:

- The actor's name would be changed.
- A fake biography would be created, working as much from a basis of truth as could be logically salable.
- Photographs of all types would be taken: fashion shots, close-ups, glamour poses, cheesecake, "human interest" (posing with dogs and children), and seasonal shots (cheesecake shots for Christmas, Halloween, and

other holidays), all of which would be widely circulated to newspapers and magazines.

- “Plants”—small stories to appear in movie magazines and newspapers that mentioned the new star name and kept it before the public as often as possible—would be sent out and “dates” would be arranged with a slightly bigger-name star of the opposite sex (which benefited the stardom of both). “Plants” were a form of imprinting: Keep the name in front of movie fans and they’ll eventually follow it to the box office.
- Introductions would be made to every publicist in town, every magazine writer in town, and every newspaperman or photographer to “show off” the new girl/guy in interviews.
- Lessons in everything would begin, the most important of which was learning how to act *for the camera*.

The first step was the all-important name change. There could be no believable glamour in an Irmagard Gluck or Percy Flutterman. (Having your name changed, often without your consent or participation, must have had *some* effect on these people. But most were willing.) If, by some lucky chance, your name was deemed “bankable,” you could keep it. Eleanor Powell had a musical flow, and she had already established her name on Broadway. Van Johnson was perfect—simple, honest, and easy to spell; it suited, and its owner fit the promotional campaign being built for him as an all-American boy next door. Errol Flynn was excellent. Errol was unusual but easy to pronounce, and it carried a touch of class, a bit of old-fashioned British gentlemanliness, which Flynn brought back to reality with its jaunty Irish origins, grounding the actor in “good guy” roles rather than prissy ones. Sometimes one half of a name could be okay: Elizabeth Grable was fine, but her nickname, Betty, worked best to reflect her zingy, down-to-earth image and her lighthearted musical roles. Ethnic players were allowed ethnic names—Katina Paxinou, Akim Tamiroff, Leo Carrillo, Mischa Auer, Leonid Kinskey, Lupe Velez—and minority actors who were

comedians could have joke names to identify their trade: “Stepin Fetchit” for an African American and “Parkyakarkus” for a Greek.

Most potential stars, however, had to undergo the name change. This was imperative if your physical image and your name were at odds. For instance, strongman “Duke” Wayne’s name was the unacceptable Marion Michael Morrison. The tall and exotic beauty Cyd Charisse had the comedy handle of Tula Finklea. Cary Grant was Archibald Leach—no elegant man of your dreams there—and Robert Taylor, a pretty man always striving to seem more masculine, carried the original name of Spangler Arlington Brugh—a name that would not work on a marquee, or with his image. Names often needed to be shortened—Harlean Carpenter became Jean Harlow—or made more elegant—Ruby Stevens became Barbara Stanwyck. The British Jimmy Stewart had to become Stewart Granger for obvious reasons. Joan Crawford’s Lucille Le Sueur, which no one knew how to pronounce, sounded too much like “sewer” when they tried it. As she was growing up, Crawford had been nicknamed Billie, and when her mother remarried, she had become Billie Cassin, a good name for a flapper but perhaps not for someone who wanted (and got) five decades of stardom. (Crawford’s close friends, like William Haines, always called her Billie.) It was famously publicized that her star name, Joan Crawford, was the *second*-place winner in a movie weekly’s “name the star” (and win \$1,000) contest, after the first winner, Joan Arden, turned out to be the name of someone already in show business. Second place! How would you like to live your life not only without your own name, the one your mom and dad chose for you, but also with a *second*-place contest winner from a ten-cent fan magazine? Even more humiliating to the woman herself was the fact that she didn’t know how to pronounce the new name. Being a Texan, she called herself “Jo-An” for weeks before someone corrected her.*

Two curious examples of name change involve Gig Young and Anne Shirley. Both began their careers with “movie star” name changes: Young was originally Byron Barr and Shirley was Dawn O’Day. Both were so billed. But in 1942, Byron Barr played the

character of “Gig Young” in *The Gay Sisters* and in 1934 Dawn O’Day played Anne Shirley in *Anne of Green Gables*. Both stars changed their actual working names, which were already false, to another level of falsehood—permanently becoming named for characters they had played.[†]

After the name change, the “star biography” was created. The best part of the studio bio was that it could eliminate anything boring or unsavory about a star’s past. It could also exaggerate small things, turning an actor who’d won a meaningless medal at a local swimming meet into a “celebrated swimming champion.” Fathers who were plumbers became engineers or architects, and two years in reform school could be recast as “continuing his education.” The creation of a star bio was essential, because it defined the story that was going to be fed to the public: where he or she came from, and who the family was.

The “bio” was a blatant advertising tool, designed, like all advertising, to shape the buyer’s attitude and convince him that he needed the product. And the bio had to be clever—attention getting. If there were something a little bit exotic that could be used, such as the fact that Olivia de Havilland and her sister Joan Fontaine were born in Japan, it was emphasized. In fact, the de Havilland sisters were perfect studio bio material. Not only were they sisters, which was interesting (not much to them, apparently, as they were lifelong rivals), but they also had an illustrious relative, the airplane designer Sir George de Havilland. This gave them class. Athletes like Johnny Weissmuller and Sonja Henie, who had been Olympic champions, were easy to write up, and Tyrone Power’s father having been a famous actor gave the son a touch of movie royalty. Jimmy Stewart’s all-American personality fit well with his upbringing in Indiana, Pennsylvania, where his father owned a hardware store. Stewart had gone to Princeton, which might have knocked him out of the “I’m just a small-town guy like you” category, except that it was sold as “and this small-town guy like you actually showed those Princeton snobs a thing or two.” Ingrid Bergman, a foreigner, was Americanized. She liked to “eat huge sandwiches...and play jazz

records.” She was photographed on a Minnesota farm, cheerfully churning butter with fellow Swedish Americans.

To enhance the “creative” process (as it were), the newcomer was asked to fill out an elaborate form that asked such questions as “What does your father do for a living?” and “What are your hobbies?” and “Where did you go to school?” There were also queries about favorite colors, pets, phobias, or exciting vacations, but it was a questionnaire designed to provide the publicity people with something tangible to use. Clark Gable’s questionnaire helped the MGM publicity department understand how Gable wanted to see himself. They used his answers to weave together the truth (Gable had worked a great many odd jobs when he was young) with his secret wishes (he had been around men who hunted and fished when he was a kid, and he wanted to be like them). Publicists wrote about him as a “rough-and-ready guy” who had worked with his hands and done all kinds of labor (true), and they photographed him in sportsman’s clothes, posed against fireplaces, surrounded by guns, smoking a pipe, and looking calm but ready to wrestle a polecat should it become necessary in Beverly Hills (false). Adrian, MGM’s resident clothing designer, created an offscreen Gable wardrobe: turtlenecks, open-necked shirts, simple sweaters, and riding breeches worn with boots. MGM also hired experts to teach him how to shoot, fly-fish, and ride. Gable loved his new image and adapted to it gracefully. Ironically, he eventually became a “rugged outdoorsman” who loved to hunt and fish. A bio success—life imitating art.*

While studios tried to ground the bio in reality as much as possible, they also treated the questionnaire like a trampoline. They jumped on it to achieve an unlikely soaring upward toward some pretty elaborate lies. Mickey Rooney saw the studio put out a release claiming his favorite author was Eugene O’Neill, but “that implied I read books...I didn’t read books.” Even “quality” magazines published false stories as if they were gospel. *Life* said Ann Sheridan “smokes thirty cigarettes daily, likes aquaplaning, wears an opal ring, has read Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and fears policemen.” Alice Faye said, “I’d read stories about Alice Faye

in the papers—stories the studio publicity department had planted—and I would wonder who that girl was. It didn't sound like anyone I knew." Biographer Stefan Kanfer says Lucille Ball's original bio (invented for her by RKO in the late 1930s) claimed she was "a woman of multiple talents, an odd mixture of Amelia Earhart, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Aphrodite." Among other things, it said: "She once took an open cockpit plane up in weather 20 degrees below freezing to effect the rescue of a schoolboy; she plays a fast game of polo, has a hobby of woodcarving, owns a profitable florist shop, and is one of Hollywood's best-dressed actresses." Kanfer points out that Ball "did not know how to fly, was not a horsewoman, had no financial interest in any flower shop and dressed well but not as well as a hundred more successful actresses with their own couturiers." All studio bios were flexible: They were updated as publicity brought fact into the process. Since fans would soon enough know whom the star had married—and divorced—bios had to be shaped and reshaped. But no matter what, they always contained the title of the star's current project in release and the current project in the works.

The studio bio was all a game, a storytelling game, a shrewd tool that helped suggest to fans how to see the star. Only what seemed right was used; the rest was thrown out. Her publicity bio never suggested that Rita Hayworth was not a professional dancer as a kid—nor, in fact, that she was not a Latina. Her real name, Margarita Cansino, was front and center in her bio, because that ethnic association with the fiery and the exotic was part of her persona. Bios hid defects, but could also use poverty and hardship to gain sympathy and connect stars directly to their fans. Just as Eleanor Powell had been presented as a former ugly duckling, no secret was ever made of Crawford's hardscrabble life, nor of June Allyson's crippling childhood accident. Crawford's background fit because she played shopgirls who rose out of poverty to wealth. Allyson's star appeal was that of a "likable little waif" without ethereal beauty. Her recovery from an accident was useful. (However, if a star were to be shaped into a ladylike figure, a former job as a hash-house waitress would be swept aside.)

Many on-screen jokes have been made over these star bios. In *It's a Great Feeling* (1949), a fake bio is created for a would-be star: "Eighteen duels fought over her...born in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower..." Then one of the inventors says brusquely, "So much for the facts...the rest you can make up." The definitive example is a musical montage at the beginning of *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). While Gene Kelly, as silent film star Don Lockwood, tells his swooning fans his "bio," movie audiences see the truth. Pressed by a gushing interviewer to tell "the story of your success," Kelly describes how he and pal Donald O'Connor would "perform for Mum and Dad's society friends" (they are shown dancing for pennies in a beer parlor), how he was "taken to the theatre: Shaw, Molière, the finest classics" (they are sneaking into a cinema showing a horror picture), how he attended "an exclusive dramatic academy" (slapstick in vaudeville), and played "the finest symphonic halls" (cheap theatres in Arizona and Wyoming). Throughout all this, smiles Kelly, his motto was "dignity, always dignity."

No one became a star without posing for silly holiday promotions. In looking through old studio publicity shots, it's one thing to see Marilyn Monroe sitting on an exploding firecracker or Esther Williams on a diving board in a bathing suit, but quite another to come across Loretta Young dressed up as an Easter Bunny, her ears all a-flop, her eyes all a-twitter as she proffers a gigantic Easter egg, or Susan Hayward, who later became an Oscar-winning actress, "riding" a phallic Fourth of July rocket in shorts and high heels, a leering grin on her face. Even Greta Garbo had to pose with a lion (the MGM logo). Men were not exempt either. Stills exist of a bare-chested John Wayne, of Victor Mature scrubbing himself in a claw-footed bathtub, and of no less than Ronald Reagan coyly posed at poolside in tight black bathing trunks adorned with a snappy white patent leather belt. (Lookin' good, Mr. President!) Every potential star, male or female, was brought into the publicity department and asked to pose for a set of photos that included shots at the beach; holiday promotion shots with witch hats, pumpkins, Santa suits and Christmas trees, and firecrackers; "healthy" shots in

shorts and jodhpurs, fashion photos in suits, dresses, and hats; and various suggestively glamorous poses in tuxedos and low-cut evening gowns.

The publicity departments released these photos to newspapers and magazines on a steady basis. They were attractive fillers of space, and media editors were happy to use them because the public loved cheesecake and the photos were free. Taking pictures of would-be stars—and established stars—was a huge part of the movie business. The largest outlet for all this photography was, of course, the many movie magazines of this era.



Stars posed for endless “holiday” promotion shots. A young Betty Grable makes a perky Valentine’s Day Cupid, Janet Gaynor decorates the tree for Christmas, and Dorothy Lamour is a pilgrim for Thanksgiving. Lamour’s photo was sent out with a suitable caption: “Just as the Puritan maids of old gazed seaward toward the shores whence they came, wondering what the next ship from England would bring, so does lovely Dorothy Lamour stand at the restless shore.”



Publicists knew how to capitalize on current events for all sorts of magazines. For instance, during World War II, blond Veronica Lake enjoyed a brief but potent stardom as a sex symbol. (“I wasn’t a sex symbol,” she later said. “I was a sex zombie.”) Lake was famous for her long and silky hair, which fell provocatively forward, swinging loosely over one eye, a style that was dubbed “the peekaboo bang.”* She peekabooed out from behind it so effectively that her acting limitations were overlooked. When women went to work in defense plants, they were asked to secure their hair in nets or caps to comply with machine safety rules. Lake’s studio moved quickly to use defense plant regulations to her advantage, planting ads in all magazines, claiming “the peekaboo bang popularized by Veronica Lake, Paramount’s beautiful star, soon to be seen in 1943’s *So Proudly We Hail!*” was causing factory accidents, or at least causing women some beauty salon trauma. To stretch the publicity even further, Lake posed for photos, displaying a *new* style: her hair swept back off her face and rolled up sensibly over her ears. The studio released an accompanying story that positioned Lake as central to the defense effort: By changing her hair, she proved she was a good citizen and reminded everyone that *she* was the woman all American women wanted to look like. The “Veronica Lake problem” for women working in defense plants was perfect “found” publicity, and the business made maximum use of it.†

The name change, the star bio, and the distribution of photos were the easiest parts of a studio buildup. They were in-house manipulations over which the studio had control. The next steps—the plants and the interviews—could be riskier. The publicity department went into a more careful mode when it began to market the commodity through “plants,” “dates,” and introductions around town, which meant stepping outside the safe walls of the studio lot and trusting that the newcomer would be able to hold up under press scrutiny. It was the first “baby step” outward, safe enough, since no one out there in the media, of course, believed anything the studio said about the new star. It wasn’t a question of truth, only credibility, glamour, and sales potential.‡ Joan Crawford said, “I

really knew I was a star when Mayer ordered the publicity department to...accompany my every personal appearance and make sure I said the right things...make sure I dated the right men.”

Plants included photos of actors dressed up and partying at nightclubs like Mocambo’s or Ciro’s. Sometimes these photos were real, but often, as actress Bonita Granville told me, they were faked. The two dates would be driven by the studio publicity people to the nightclub. A “wardrobe,” which had been brought along, would be handed out, so the boy and girl could go into the men’s and ladies’ rooms to get dressed. After they were suitably gowned, they would come out, pose at a table, then return to the bathrooms, change back into their own clothes, return the finery to the studio rep, and be driven home. (Maureen O’Hara commented: “If they wanted me at a charity event or a premiere—I went.”)

My favorite plants are the whimsical ones that would run in the movie magazines’ gossip columns just to get the name in print. For instance, according to these questionable sources, George Brent left the Abbey Players in Dublin to become a secret agent in the Irish Republican Army. Olivia de Havilland could perfectly imitate a dog’s bark, and frequently did so just to startle people (a no doubt successful maneuver). Ginger Rogers slept on her stomach and wouldn’t be caught dead at a bridge table. Hedy Lamarr consulted the stars before making any decisions, and Errol Flynn “likes pretty girls and they like him.” (That one, obviously, was true.)

“Plants” were fun—probably the high point of the publicity team’s day—but introductions to movie magazine personnel and teas with Louella “Lolly” Parsons and Hedda Hopper could be dangerous. Lolly and Hedda were crucial to star arrival—and survival. (It wasn’t a joke that these two women could harm a career—both by giving you no publicity and by giving you bad publicity.) For the most part, however, the movie studios found a useful partnership with the gossip columnists and movie magazines. MGM publicist Esmee Chandlee was quoted in Scott Eyman’s book on Louis B. Mayer, *Lion of Hollywood*, as saying, “We controlled the fan magazines. When a star did an interview with a fan magazine, the story was submitted to us, and we took out whatever we

wanted.” Hiding problems was part of the game. There was a gentleman’s agreement between the Hollywood press and the studios that many things would be hushed up. The newspapers back then didn’t want to tell us more than we wanted to know. They weren’t going to run hideous personal details that weren’t considered “fit to print,” although sometimes the mags got uppity and turned the bad things stars had done into “blind” items. (“What married star was dallying with what blond newcomer on the set of their new movie?”) Insiders knew how to read these euphemisms. A star “having a high old time” at a premiere was sloshed, and an unexpected case of “appendicitis” was sometimes an abortion. People having affairs and denying it were always referred to as “just good friends.”

Interviews, a kind of live performance, were an important form of building confidence, further planting of the star’s name and face, and making connections for the future when they might really be needed. According to the records of most studios, stars were coached in interviewing techniques. Although some very young and uneducated stars would have dialogue written out for them to memorize, mostly they were told simply, “Be nice and be careful what you say.” Better safe than sorry. Stars were admonished always to promote their new film or to say that the studio’s biggest star was “their idol.”* They were also tutored on the various columnists and writers—who might be jealous or mean, who always needed to be sent a thank-you note, who might try to lure them into bed. Many hopeful stars needed no such teaching, since it was a form of preparation that was about charm as much as it was about chicanery. If they weren’t already past masters at charming their way forward, they wouldn’t be on the star roster.

The fan mags cooperated with the studios because movies were their main source of advertising. Studios spent big bucks promoting upcoming releases in their pages. Movie magazines reviewed almost every film released and announced all coming attractions. Unlike the unattractive and destructive tabloids of today, these magazines specialized in beautiful layouts, color portraits, and sumptuous ads. Although published on cheap paper, magazines such as *Photoplay*,

Modern Screen, *Screenland*, *Movie Stories*, and *Screen Album* existed to feed the public's appetite for photographs and stories on their film favorites and to help create new stars. The mags wrote articles that cleverly compensated for star flaws or skillfully apologized for star mistakes. Strategically placed articles also headed off trouble ("Don't Worry About Van Johnson's Marriage to His Best Friend's Wife") or told fans how to view things ("Ty Power Needed to Move On from Annabella—His War Service Changed Him").

These magazines told fans everything—that is, everything the studio wanted them to know. *Modern Screen* of April 1940 began a monthly column known as "Charting the Stars." In alphabetical order, 350 star names are given, with facts on each individual's previous occupation, first feature movie, its year, the star's favorite sport, hobby, current studio, and, surprisingly, actual current address. (Times were more innocent, and stalkers couldn't necessarily afford tickets to drop in unexpectedly on someone.) This chart tells readers that Jean Arthur used to be a fashion model, Don Ameche a ditchdigger, Lew Ayres a banjo player, and Fred Astaire—surprise!—a dancer. Binnie Barnes says her sport is "motoring" and Gene Autry's is "baseball." (Later in life he was so successful he bought a baseball team of his own.) Hobbies range from "raising dogs" (Mary Astor) to "collecting first editions" (Edward Arnold). And Fred Astaire lived at 1121 Summit Drive in Beverly Hills, in case anyone wanted to stop by.

Fan mags also carried Ann Landers-type advice columns, beauty tips, fashion features, letters to the editors, gossip of a harmless sort, even "recipes from the stars." The recipes featured male stars as often as female. Mickey Rooney allegedly raised his own chickens and therefore, according to a 1940 *Modern Screen*, went every day to his henhouse to gather his own fresh eggs. Ergo, he shared his egg recipes with readers: Mickey's instructions for Creamy Scrambled Eggs, Shirred Eggs Andy, and Devilled Dinner Eggs. In 1946, the magazine reviewed Preston Sturges's celebrated restaurant, the Players, featuring a photograph of a fur-clad Deanna Durbin sitting alone at a table. Recipes were included, my favorite being Lamb Kidneys Sauté Turbigo, a title worthy of something in a Sturges

movie. (It serves three and involves canned mushrooms and six optional pork sausages.)

The magazines were also used for an even subtler form of showcasing: using a star to sell a non-movie product.* Beautiful color portraits, specially photographed for the ad, showed the star hawking the item.† Studios encouraged this, cleverly garnering a form of publicity that the product companies had to pay *them* to do. (The money did not go to the star, but to the studio.) In the August 1944 issue of *Modern Screen* can be seen Gene Tierney (“*Laura*, forthcoming from 20th Century–Fox”) promoting Woodbury Sun Peach makeup (“It gives a vivid summer glow”); Virginia Mayo (“See her with Bob Hope in *The Princess and the Pirate*”) hustling “Tayglo, the new miracle makeup in four enchanting shades (You’ll positively radiate glamour!)”; Diana Lynn (“in *And the Angels Sing* at a theatre near you”) giving her “design for decorating” with Bates Bedspreads and Matching Curtains; Shirley Temple (“one of seven stars in *Since You Went Away*”) pushing Royal Crown Cola (“Simply super!”); and Lana Turner (“now in *Marriage Is a Private Affair*”) celebrated as that month’s current fashion guide (“I’d clean forgotten how wonderful pin-checks were, and then, smacko, there was gorgeous Lana wearing one”).*



No matter how big or how dignified the star, endorsements were a fact of life: Irene Dunne and Charles Boyer, promoting Rheingold Beer.

You can trace a star's progress by tracking his or her plants, interviews, and photographs through these fan magazines. The first time an actor's name or face appears it is usually in candid snapshots in the gossip section. For instance, in 1938 Betty Grable, who became the leading female box office star of all time, is seen "dancing at Mocambo" or "cheering her favorite horse at Santa Anita" in the gossip-column section of *Modern Screen*. Grable is in the company of her then-husband, Jackie Coogan. Although she is beginning to move up the ladder, she is not yet a star. In the back of the magazine she is shown dancing in a still from her current film, *College Swing*. Her skirt is flying high to reveal her famous legs (an amazing number of such "cheesecake" photos of Grable would appear in the 1940s).

By the October 1940 issue Grable has advanced to the front of the magazine. She appears in an article entitled "Lovely to Look At."

She is modeling hand-knit sweaters for a column that uses her as a hook to draw the reader's eye, since the article is really little more than an ad for knitting directions, not a story on Grable. ("Betty Grable's Bermuda blue slip-on with diamond pattern and tucked shoulders has that elegant imported look.") The reader can write to *Modern Screen* and, "at no cost," be sent the knitting instructions as long as a self-addressed stamped envelope is enclosed.

Grable is also seen brushing her teeth, in an article called "Brighten Your Smile," which tells readers that clothes may make the man, but a beautiful smile will hold him. Grable, the story tells us, "has the gay, flashing smile that goes with her dancing talent." She is shown at the Jitterbug Jamboree at the Hollywood Legion Stadium in the company of George Raft. Her picture appears in an article on "Color Your Fingertips." Grable, the caption says, "can well be proud of those pretty nails she displays in her latest hit, *Coney Island*." Her two latest films are rated: *Footlight Serenade* is given a three-star rating and *Springtime in the Rockies*, three and a half stars. A gossip item under "Good News" tells us that "Betty Grable, who is practically Mama of the Morale Department, came into the commissary from the *Coney Island* set wearing a skintight cerise jacket, a hip-swathing plaid skirt, superdark suntan makeup, a perky pillbox hat and a gorgeous blue black wig." (This actually is one of her *Coney Island* costumes.)

By March 1943 Grable is the sole subject of one of the magazine's leading articles. Called "Miss Terrific!", it defines its title as "alias Betty Grable, the gal who out-hollers lusty Dodger fans, bowls a mighty 230 and reaps 14,000 fan letters each month." By this point, Betty Grable has been successfully built up into a real star. From then on, full-page color photographs of her appeared in several fan mags every month, and her face was on the cover at least once a year for every single movie magazine published, the prime recognition of star power. She also appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, the ultimate proof of her status.

While the publicity department was planting magazine items, dragging the star around town to be seen, taking endless photos, and setting up stories and interviews, the studio continued giving

potential stars the training needed for them to take their place in the star hierarchy: manners, diction, acting, riding, walking, dancing, singing, fencing, and lessons on how to meet fans and dignitaries (two different procedures).^{*} Debbie Reynolds said, “If you didn’t learn from it, you were a moron.” If the “star” was underage or a child, the law required school lessons at the little schoolhouse on the lot, or with a tutor. No matter how old an MGM female star became, she could be recognized by her “Metro walk,” learned in the studio’s grooming class: Suck in the stomach, square the shoulders, take a deep breath, and step off on the right foot. It was a “best foot forward” lesson that lasted for life. (On the other hand, no apparent lessons from Metro’s “little red schoolhouse” for kids lasted even a day.) The most important lessons, however, were those in which the star was taught a new kind of acting—acting for the camera in a motion picture.^{*}





During the late 1930s, when Betty Grable was under contract to Paramount, she posed for countless publicity stills: here she arches, she golfs, she salts, and she travels. It was all news to America.



This was accomplished largely by working the star to death. (Between 1932 and 1936, Cary Grant was under contract to Paramount Pictures, and he made twenty-four movies, an average of six per year. By 1937, he had become a star.) Clark Gable was under contract to MGM from 1931 to 1954 (with three years off for war service), and in his first three years he made seventeen films, including one loan-out to Paramount. † Casting Clark Gable in seventeen movies in a little over two years reveals the efficiency of the Hollywood factory. While Gable was being “fixed up” by the studio, sold out on the streets, publicized by studio flacks, written about and photographed and shown off, he was also working at his craft, learning his trade. Since the old system could turn out a great many movies in a single year, Gable could be filming all day, six days a week, mastering the business of movie stardom. For him, the idea of “movie star” was thus not a mystery. It was his job. MGM taught him that if he worked hard, he could get better at it. He was shown that, despite all the hoopla, it wasn’t really glamorous and not about words like “zing,” “pizzazz,” “oomph,” or “va-va-voom” however much they pretended it was. It was about learning to be photographed well by both moving and still cameras, about developing a three-dimensional quality to make himself look “real” inside the frame, about not being afraid of the camera, about

keeping still and letting it allegedly observe him “thinking,” about projecting a touch of ironic distance from whatever was going on in the movie plot, a distance that could establish a relationship with viewers to make them partners in the storytelling process and above all, partners in feeling how the character was supposed to feel.

Finally, the business knew to teach a Gable that while these things sounded esoteric, vague, highly subjective, or imaginary, in moviemaking they were *technical*. They involved the camera, the editing process, and all the storytelling machinery of moviemaking. So Clark Gable, in seventeen movies, learned how to be a movie star by learning about movie acting and about how it was different from any other kind of acting. Director William K. Howard explained that difference: “In the theatre you must act...in motion pictures you don’t dare act. You have to do every scene as if it were actually happening the way it should happen.”

To be a movie star required an actor to understand the filmmaking process because it was a part of his characterization. Movie actors were not acting for a large audience that was out there in front of them. They were acting for the camera, which stood in for the audience, and the camera was a singular presence, watching them closely. A movie actor had to learn to let the camera represent each individual sitting in the movie house, as if he or she were alone in the dark with the actor. Movie acting was a one-on-one performance relationship communicated directly through a camera. Those who could understand that—the Clark Gables—became movie stars.

Potential stars needed to understand the requirements of movie technology, which redefined the theatrical idea of acting. A filmed performance has lines of dialogue, bits of business to perform, and action to carry out in the same way as in the theatre, but movie stars have to hit marks drawn on the floor for the convenience of camera movement, be aware of intimate lighting, look into the camera on cue, and understand framing, composition, editing, sound-track narrations, voice-overs, and the use of the close-up. Scenes are shot out of order, sometimes without the other actor you’re supposed to be talking to even physically present. The great

stars, especially the women, were helped in the studio system to develop skills regarding lighting and camera position that were partly to ensure they would look good, but also to be better actors, more pleasing to their audiences. Claudette Colbert was legendary for wanting to be photographed from her “good side,” which she had determined early in her career, but she was equally astute about the placement of all the actors in any scene in which she appeared.* She learned to ask how tall each actor was, where the shadows were going to fall, and how close an angle she would have in any performance moment, even if she were only standing and listening in the shot. Joan Crawford, according to George Cukor, “had no fear of the camera. You could dolly right up onto her and she would never even blink.” Crawford was always willing to do screen tests with co-stars. “I wanted to know how we would look together in the frame,” Crawford said. “How tall was my partner? Could he act? Would he be comfortable with me? Could I hold my own?” Dietrich could tell by the heat on her face where the camera was, and whether she should move herself as little as an inch to look better.

Finding the movies in which to let newcomers learn about acting in movies was seldom a problem for the studios. They had no shortage of roles. (Finding the right ones was the issue.) Although the studios used newcomers in all their films, they also targeted specific outlets in which to “try out” young actors and actresses. In his autobiography, Mickey Rooney confirmed the star machine by describing how his *Andy Hardy* films were constantly used in the development process: “There was, in fact, a standard studio recipe. Take one young actress, pluck her eyebrows, cap her teeth, shape her hairline, pad as required, and throw her into the ring with Andy Hardy. Then wait and see.” (This usually worked. Lana Turner, Esther Williams, Judy Garland, Donna Reed, and Kathryn Grayson became stars, although June Preisser and Helen Gilbert didn’t.)

When a studio was releasing nearly fifty features and all kinds of short subjects, however, there were many outlets for casting besides these targeted series like the *Andy Hardy* films. Anything could happen to newcomers. Sometimes they were given small but significant roles in showcase movies with big-name stars headlining:

Rita Hayworth in MGM's *Susan and God*, starring Joan Crawford and Fredric March in 1940, or in Columbia's *Only Angels Have Wings*, with Cary Grant and Jean Arthur in 1939.

Sometimes newcomers were hard-tested against competition just as they were emerging toward fame. Could a new star hold up beside a proven one? As Louis B. Mayer shepherded his protégée Greer Garson carefully forward, he showcased her in a remake of Rachel Crothers's hit stage play *When Ladies Meet*, which had originally been filmed in 1933 with Ann Harding and Myrna Loy. He felt Garson, already solidly established with two Oscar nominations in period films, should be tested in "modern" roles. He decided to pair her with Joan Crawford, the star who had epitomized the modern female by adjusting her looks from 1925 onward to always appear "right now." In 1940 Crawford's and Garson's careers were going in opposite directions. Crawford had been a megastar for over a decade, but MGM was beginning to turn away from her and toward Garson. (When Garson was taken off *Susan and God*, a weak Broadway adaptation, to star in the elegant and posh *Pride and Prejudice*, Crawford, despite her seniority, was forced to step in and take Garson's leftovers. But Crawford was always a pro and willing. "I'll play Wally Beery's grandmother if it's a good part," she said.) Crawford was on the brink of leaving Metro, the studio where she grew up, the first studio to put her under contract. She feared that her time as a star was slipping away, and she feared newcomers like Garson. (Her greater stardom, including her Oscar-winning role in *Mildred Pierce* [1945], lay ahead of her. She would outlast Garson and become the more legendary figure of the two.) But in 1941, things looked dire for Joan Crawford. She must have known the handwriting was on the wall when she was asked to support Greer Garson. She was playing the traditional role of "give the new girl a boost—and a test—by putting her in a film with a big name."*

Garson and Crawford are a strange pairing, but that's the point of *When Ladies Meet*. The movie pits two different women against each other: wife and mistress. Garson, ladylike and quietly refined, is perfectly cast as the wife, and Crawford, the tough, independent

career woman, is perfect as the other woman. In one key scene, Garson plays the piano. Crawford wanders toward her and begins to sing. Finally, she, too, sits down. The two women sing together and enjoy an easy comradeship. Their profiles, two actresses wrapped up in their performed moment, are worth about \$50 million, yet neither of them blinks. Each is intent on playing correctly, in the moment, and as a unit without rivalry. What happens on-screen is a lesson in star making (but not a very good movie). It's the studio star system at work, demonstrating the rules of its game. Crawford mutes her performance, playing down her power. Garson is able to play up to Crawford's wattage, although the production team clearly favors her, since she is a star being groomed. Often Crawford sits at Garson's feet, in half shadow, and Garson gets the key light. Garson has more close-ups. Her clothes are dramatic, especially a simple, long black velvet dressing gown trimmed in a white ruffle from throat to mid-chest, with matching ruffled sleeves. Crawford knew her own stardom depended on being professional rather than on always getting the key light. She was smart about her career—and cooperative. Garson was also intelligent and understood it was important to work well with Crawford. It's safe to say they didn't much like each other, but it doesn't show on film. What shows on-screen is a perfect female star harmony. What showed offscreen was the star machine at work.

A reliable studio practice in casting newcomers was the creation of a movie to feature more than one newcomer to see what would happen. Would the public take to one of them, and if so, which one? Such a movie would be made cheaply, with other contract players surrounding the neophytes to carry them forward. Two classic "try out the newcomers" movies, both designed to showcase young talent under contract, are the 1932 Warner Bros. movie *Three on a Match* and the MGM hit *Two Girls and a Sailor*, from 1944. The first film is *very* inexpensive, a typical Warners product of the era. Not a star-driven studio, Warners was always looking for capable workhorse actors who could fit more than one genre. Definitely a star studio, Metro was willing to spend a lot of money to test hopefuls, because for MGM, developing stars was basic. The

Warners picture is a product of the early talkies, where the ability to speak well and deliver dialogue was important, and the MGM movie comes during the early 1940s, when some actors had gone to the war and many of the big-name female Metro stars were beginning to age, so star wattage mattered.



Studios used one film to showcase multiple newcomers, to see which one would catch on. Warner's *Three on a Match* had Bette Davis, Joan Blondell, and Ann Dvorak; MGM's *Two Girls and a Sailor* had Gloria DeHaven, Van Johnson, and June Allyson, backed by bandleaders Xavier Cugat and Harry James.



Three on a Match has an efficient running time of sixty-four minutes, but it manages to tell three stories about what happens to three girls all the way from their 1919 childhoods to the settling of all their problems by 1932. Mary (Joan Blondell), Ruth (Bette Davis in her peroxide blond period), and Vivian (Ann Dvorak) go to Public School Number 62 together. Mary is out smoking with the boys in the school yard, Ruth is a great student, and Vivian is the classy one with “pink pants.” (Each of these characters is played by a child star during the opening scenes.) After eighth grade, Ruth will go to secretarial school, Vivian will go to an exclusive boarding school, and Mary—well, as Vivian puts it, “She’ll probably go to reform school.” (And she does.) Over the next years, their lives entwine until the dramatic moment when they share a single match to light their cigarettes (superstition contends that one of them will die soon).

The newcomer testing system is at work in *Three on a Match* in the following way: solid workhorse star to draw fans; a hot newly emerging star showcased; a newcomer potential star who can get noticed because she’s with the other two. Joan Blondell, already established as a Warner Bros. gal, is used to play a good-hearted showgirl. She was popular, a guaranteed draw with a solid fan

following. This meant her role could be small. She could shoot her few scenes and still be working on another film at the same time. In fact, Joan Blondell made ten movies in 1932! And none were bit parts. She was in *Union Depot*, *The Greeks Had a Word for Them*, *The Crowd Roars*, *The Famous Ferguson Case*, *Make Me a Star*, *Miss Pinkerton*, *Big City Blues*, *Central Park*, and *Lawyer Man* that year, as well as *Three on a Match*. Blondell was a Warner Bros. working professional, and she was cast to earn her salary *and* also to help introduce a newcomer (Davis) and support an emerging star (Dvorak).

Bette Davis was just beginning her career, and it's obvious no one quite knows what to do with her yet. She has something, but what is it? Big-eyed and arresting, she draws attention, but who's she supposed to be? Would viewers notice her? Take to her? Her role is small, and contrary to what she's more known for today, she's playing the nice quiet little girl role. Her character is obedient and studious. The studio people who are trying to figure her out have torted her up, giving her peroxide hair, but she's no Harlow. And yet the eye somehow still goes to her. The star system is *trying* to work, but it's spinning its wheels on Davis, who is rattling around in the star machine.

The center of the movie is held by the leading story character, Ann Dvorak's Vivian. Dvorak gets to play the girl who wears the furs and jewels, and she has all the big scenes, especially the women's film moment where she admits to her friends, and later to her husband, that "I have it all, but I'm not fulfilled. Something's missing." Dvorak had already been successful in the early 1930s, but she was being given every chance to star at Warners. Sadly, she climbed up but couldn't stay on top and soon fell back into supporting roles. (She was a fine actress and a beauty. However, she's an uneasy cross between Joan Crawford and Loretta Young in looks. In fact, she was a stand-in for both in her early days.)

Three on a Match: three actresses with Warner Bros. contracts. Three girls in the story. Three careers on the line. Warner Bros. efficiently testing, using, and yet seeming only to be making an entertainment movie that is going to more than recoup its money.

What a business! In sixty-four minutes you get a dozen years of story for each girl, with careers, marriage, failed romance, nannyhood, kidnapping, drug addiction, martyrdom, motherhood, suicide, and disaster...and two men (only two, because Davis doesn't get one). A lot for your money, plus each section of the stories is introduced with popular sheet music of its era, newspaper headlines, songs, current events, and trivia ("In 1917, only two beauty shops paid taxes, but in 1930, it's a two-billion-dollar business.")

MGM's example, *Two Girls and a Sailor*, put four young possibilities before the public: June Allyson, Gloria DeHaven, Tom Drake, and Van Johnson. Each was being given a top shot because all of them had already experienced a significant early success, and because the studio was retooling its star roster in response to World War II.* Studio opinion was that Allyson was probably going to make a wonderfully quirky sidekick character for musicals and comedies as well as a lead in B films and programmers. Drake and Johnson might become teenaged heartthrobs, a type that was becoming an increasingly important economic category.† Of the four, DeHaven and Johnson appeared to studio bosses to have the most potential. Johnson was already at the top of Metro's list, having found solid success playing Dr. Gillespie's new assistant in their popular *Dr. Kildare* series, and DeHaven looked as if she might be a musical version of Lana Turner.

To take out box office insurance, Metro dropped several big-time performers they had under contract into the mix (José Iturbi, Lena Horne, Ben Blue, Virginia O'Brien, Gracie Allen) and added two of the hottest big bands of the day (Xavier Cugat and Harry James). They also backed their fledglings with character actors like Henry Stephenson and Donald Meek. And not being the kind of guys who'd take any chances if they didn't have to, MGM topped it all off by rolling in Jimmy Durante to play an old vaudevillian. Durante was an MGM blue chip. He was enormously popular with audiences during the 1940s, and the studio decided to have him perform his famous "Inka Dinka Doo" number in the movie, making sure the

previews excerpted it for audiences so they'd know. At a time when most musicals would be in costly Technicolor, the movie was shot in black-and-white. The plot was kept simple: It's a pleasant little story with no real acting challenges.

All this was to showcase some new talent, but it paid off. Gloria DeHaven said the film was "the breakthrough for all of us." *Two Girls and a Sailor* was a big box office hit. Johnson's stardom was completely confirmed, and Drake made fifteen movies for MGM that all did well. For a few short years (1944 to 1950) he was a lovely young "boy next door," perfect for Judy Garland in *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) and an effective lead in *The Green Years* in 1946. Producer Joe Pasternak assessed Drake at that time: "He has the same quality June Allyson has—he's just nice and average enough for the average girl to find a facsimile...in her own hometown." But here Johnson and Drake are showcased together, and the comparison hurts Drake. Beside Johnson, he is bland. Drake has an unusual voice, which helps draw viewers to him, but Johnson is much more distinctive, a large presence cramming the frame, while Drake seems to be receding out of it. Johnson *also* has a distinctive voice, and he can sing, dance, and do serious drama. Drake's range is smaller. As Johnson's star rose higher, Tom Drake slowly bottomed out. MGM more than got their money out of him, however.* What was unexpected was the DeHaven/Allyson story. Legend has it that originally Allyson was scheduled to play the prettier of the two sisters, and that her husband-to-be, Dick Powell, told MGM that this would be crazy—DeHaven was clearly the prettier girl. (This would mean that Powell either slyly conned MGM into giving Allyson the better part, or that he didn't really think she was pretty enough to be a star.) Not everyone believes this story, but everyone *does* agree that Allyson's part was built up as the movie progressed because the studio saw that she *was* going to become a major property. Not only could she sing, dance, and play comedy, but she was discovered to have a poignant, touching quality that would work in dramas. She could handle scenes of great sentiment with ease and naturalism.

DeHaven, for many reasons a solid choice for stardom, didn't exactly lose out. She came from a successful show business family and had played in Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) as a child. She was a pro and accepted the ways of the business. She had already gone through MGM's buildup process, with small roles in *Susan and God*, *Two-Faced Woman*, *Keeping Company*, and *The Penalty* between 1940 and 1941, and she had been featured in *Best Foot Forward* and *Thousands Cheer* in 1943 and in *Broadway Rhythm* in 1944. After *Two Girls*, she continued to have success at MGM, playing the lead in musicals (*Summer Holiday* [1948]) and dramas. (DeHaven had a long and solid career and is still working today, although she never became a top-ranked movie star like June Allyson.) *Two Girls and a Sailor* illustrates MGM's star machine working at full power. It created two major movie stars—Johnson and Allyson—and added two solid A-list players who could give good value when cast: Drake and DeHaven. And the film made money, a trial balloon that more than paid for itself: an MGM success story.

When newcomers had successfully come through all their buildup and initial casting, they were seriously evaluated not only inside the studio, but outside. At some point during the hoopla, while the studios were setting out stars as bait, the Hollywood newspapers and trades and columnists began assessing players on their own. ("I am something in a zoo," said Hedy Lamarr about this when it happened to her.) The studios paid close attention to this first circle of evaluation, coming as it did from their own town. An example of such insider evaluations can be found in the *Los Angeles Examiner*, which listed its "ten greatest discoveries of 1936: Deanna Durbin, Robert Taylor, Sonja Henie, Jane Wyman, Tyrone Power Jr. [sic], the Ritz Brothers, Simone Simon, Mischa Auer, Reginald Gardiner, and Martha Raye." In response, Elizabeth Yeaman, a columnist for the *Hollywood Citizen* news and a shrewd observer of the Hollywood scene, wrote an article that pooh-poohed the idea that there were ten great discoveries in 1936. She says there were possibly six new stars who actually rose from obscurity, and she identifies them as: Bobby Breen, Simone Simon, Errol Flynn, Deanna Durbin, Robert Taylor, and Olivia de Havilland. Yeaman's hard-

nosed article analyzes Simon, Flynn, and de Havilland coldly. Simon, a name unknown today, is, Yeaman says, “a publicity-made star.” A baby-faced French girl, Simon was launched with a large exploitation campaign in the movie *Girls’ Dormitory* (1936), but, warns Yeaman, “public reaction to Simon has not yet crystallized.” Yeaman further warns that she has heard the dreadful word “temperament” associated with Simon’s behavior. Her ruthless conclusion was “Personally, I’m not very hopeful about her career.” (Yeaman was right.)

Flynn is assessed as having won his opportunity because of his extraordinary looks and unusually good speaking voice. Flynn, she says, “is learning to act” and has enough “beauty” to hold the public. She feels Warners took a big gamble when they starred him in *Captain Blood*, but that Flynn’s romantic on-screen personality helped him emerge as a real star. De Havilland, she writes, has been presented in “superb pictures at Warners, but she cannot yet be strictly ‘classified as a star’ because so far she has not yet had to carry a movie by herself although she was ‘unknown a year ago’ and ‘has gone very far in 1936.’”

Newspaper articles such as Yeaman’s prove that everyone in and around the business knew there was a star machine and understood how it worked. Yeaman refuses to endorse de Havilland fully because she knows the process has not yet put the actress to the full test—carrying a big-budget film on her own. (In fact, as a Warner Bros. contract player, de Havilland was a classic example of a beautiful young actress with an amazing level of talent who was worked like a circus pony and held back too long.)

The star machine was never a secret. Hollywood wasn’t concerned about the public “discovering” that their favorite darlings were “manufactured.” With their usual “heigh-ho, here we go” ability to turn anything that came along into a publicity plus, the studios took firm ownership of their practical machine concept and told the public all about it, glamorizing it in the process. For example, a late 1930s issue of *Photoplay* describes in detail how the “department” that “makes the stars” really works:

You have heard of talent scouts, and you've been led to believe that these legendary shadows slip incognito down the streets, reach into the crowds, and toss the best-looking specimens onto the screen from the pavement. You've been led to believe that's all there is. There *are* talent scouts...but they're only the first pawns in a game that in the last few years has become systematized, scientific. They bring in the raw material, and [the studio] does the rest.

The article explains clearly how potential star "students" were trained, groomed, and featured in different roles in order to find the type the public most liked to see them play. The magazine maintains the magic of stardom by also reminding readers that, ultimately, it depends on talent, intelligence, vitality, poise, a natural dramatic spark, but, as always, the unknown key ingredient: "something."

Understanding the audience's desire to possess the mystery of stardom by having it demystified, Hollywood also made movies about the process. These movies brought the dream of stardom right down to its most democratic level (Esther Blodgett arrives in Hollywood, fresh off the farm) while still maintaining its greatest romantic illusions (Esther becomes Vicki Lester and *A Star Is Born*). Movies about becoming a movie star (among them all three versions of *A Star Is Born* [1936, 1954, and 1974], as well as *What Price Hollywood?* [1932] and *The Bad and the Beautiful* [1952]) gave the public the basic hoo-hah of star hype: Only someone really special can become your dream persona, but that person could actually be you. Movie stars were gods, but they were the gods running your elevator or selling your groceries.

To reassure the audience that what they were never going to have really wasn't all that hot, movie stories about the star machine made the news pretty grim. If you became a movie star, you'd lose all your friends, who were far better folk than you anyway. Your family would give up on you, and the love of your life would walk out. You'd start to regret your fame, with its empty nights and full closets. Then you'd become an addict, start coughing and staggering around, and suddenly fall off your high heels and die. Talk about cautionary tales! Stardom, said Hollywood on-screen, was a real bitch. But with good clothes. So don't be envious, little fan, just love

the star of your choice with every penny you can possibly spend at the box office. And don't forget the fan magazines, photos, autographs, paper dolls, coloring books, and endorsed merchandise.*

When a star in development had gone through all the evaluating and fixing, building up and promoting, outside scrutiny and pressure, there was one final all-important step: the one the studio would have to leave in the hands of the public, the fickle fans it depended on.

Let's say the machine had done its job. The young actor or actress had passed all tests and had arrived at the star level. The studio was happy. The new star looked into the mirror and said, "I see a star." The studio looked at the star and said, "I see money." But the public had to look into the movie frame and say something, too: "I see a sexy man I'd like to be with" (Clark Gable); "I see an exotic, unknowable beauty" (Greta Garbo); "I see a shopgirl just like myself who works hard but in the end wins money, clothes, and mansions because she's just like me" (Joan Crawford); "I see some red-hot tap dancing" (Eleanor Powell). The audience had to see something it wanted, needed, liked, or loved. It had to see some *thing*, even something it couldn't put into words but *knew* was there. The star needed the right role, the right co-star, the right genre—and the fan's endorsement.

The final step was the one that put the name above the title and could even lead to legendary status: It was typecasting. If the star's special type hadn't already been locked firmly in place by the buildup, or if nature hadn't decreed it in the first place through exotic beauty (Hedy Lamarr) or specialized talent (Eleanor Powell), it had to happen *now*. Every top-of-the-line movie star had to find a type that he or she could play over and over. And over. That would keep the movies rolling and the money flowing in. The star had to become "bankable," which meant the star had to become a recognizable shelf product.

* One variation of the story says Mayer later became afraid she couldn't carry the show and planned to replace her with Joan Crawford. Powell herself often said that Mayer was

unhappy with the fact that, as shooting progressed, her role was dominating the film. She *does* dominate, and Mayer would never have let that happen if he hadn't believed in her. She has close-up after close-up, is allowed to imitate Katharine Hepburn in 1932's *Morning Glory* (and sends her right up), and is even allowed to be saucy and flirtatious as she impersonates the French star La Belle Arlette.

- * It lost in all categories.

- † Marjorie Lane dubbed Eleanor Powell in her early films.

- * The MGM makeup department consisted of fifty-two people and was famous for the boast it could "make any plain-looking woman beautiful in one hour and any beautiful woman hideous in four minutes." They worked in a suite filled with spirit gum, false hair, wigs, putty, fish skin, sponge rubber lips, paint, grease pencils, cotton fluffs, mortician's wax, false teeth, aluminum powder, and a gelatin capable of changing an entire facial contour. They *were* the wizards in the land of Oz.

- * Eleanor Powell is believed by experts on her career to have actually been in a 1930 Paramount musical, *Queen High*, which was made at New York's Astoria studio. She received no billing and was said only to be seen tapping on a tabletop for a few seconds. This film has no eyewitnesses, but if it exists, *Broadway Melody* of 1936 was her third film, her first at MGM.

- † Powell played a fresh young thing in her first few films and a more sophisticated woman in her later efforts, but she was never fussily dressed. For the most part, Eleanor Powell escaped the fashion horrors of her era and was never a victim of the Couture Killers.

- * Powell made only thirteen films, not including *Queen High*. In ten of these, she was the leading lady or was co-billed with another star. In *Scandals* she played a secondary role. In *Thousands Cheer* (1943) and *Duchess of Idaho* (1950) she performs a single specialty number, playing herself. *Duchess of Idaho* was her last movie.

- * Stewart was cast in a singing-dancing role with Powell in *Born to Dance* while MGM tried to figure out what to do with him. On his way to fame as an all-American hero, he also played a Chinese peasant, a murderer, and Jeanette MacDonald's weakling brother.

- * An unintentional howler today, this line meant "upbeat" and "fun" in its time.

- * Ann Miller, who took Powell's place as MGM's greatest female tap dancer, had a different style. She was not an acrobatic, balletic dancer, but a pure tapper, a ballroom star. The two women were never rivals and had great respect for each other.

† *The Great Morgan* is usually not counted or included in her filmography. Today it can be seen on Turner Classic Movies.

* Glenn Ford and Eleanor Powell were divorced in November 1959.

† From 1960 to 1964.

* Many dubious “schools” to help young people learn how to become movie stars sprang up around the country calling themselves “talent scouts.” The business itself satirized this process in several movies. One of these films, *365 Nights in Hollywood* (1934), carries my favorite ad for such a school: “Perhaps You Have That Spark That Could Make You the Next Gable, Garbo or Barrymore...No Talent Necessary.” It’s hilarious but painfully on the money.

* Marlon Brando’s long-lost (and believed by many to be mythical) screen test for the James Dean leading role in *Rebel Without a Cause* was recently found in the Warner Bros. vaults. Brando had made the test in 1947, although the film was not actually made until 1955. In fact, Brando didn’t make his screen debut until 1950 (in *The Men*). In 1947, Brando was just about to make his breakthrough as Stanley in the stage version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In the test, which runs five minutes, Brando looks incredibly young and slightly awkward, although he’s also slender, physically beautiful, and full of a strongly masculine power. A modern viewer of the test described Brando as “lightning on legs.” (Brando’s title card states his name, gives his age as twenty-three, his height as 5’10”, his weight as 170, his hair as brown, and his experience as: stage 3 years.)

† A poor “scene” test didn’t mean a young man or woman couldn’t be turned into a movie star. It meant they didn’t yet know how to act in front of a camera. The scene test was most important when it was being used to decide whether or not the performer—who might already even be a star or successfully employed actor—would be right for a particular role. (The wardrobe screen tests were all about clothes fitting right, looking right on the actor, and photographing correctly.)

‡ Most of the tests existing today are from the 1960s, after the studios’ heyday.

* Garson always called *Remember?* by the title *Forgive and Forget*.

* Strickling, who never told where the bodies were buried, was all-powerful at MGM. Stars were told that if they got into trouble: “Don’t call the police. Don’t call the hospital. Don’t call your lawyer. Call Howard.”

† A top star was estimated to receive about three thousand fan letters a week. (At her peak, Betty Grable averaged twenty thousand.) Fan mail usually asked for autographed photos,

most of which were signed by designated forgers. Even Bugs Bunny had a “signature stand-in.”

* The contest is a fact. It was announced in the May 2, 1925, issue of *Movie Weekly*. Under Crawford’s photograph was the caption, “Name Her and Win \$1,000!” And indeed, the winner *was* Joan Arden. However, two different people had submitted it, which meant that the magazine was going to have to pay \$2,000 to use it, and they didn’t think Crawford was worth all that. This multiple-submission problem continued through the next names on the list: Diana Grey, Joan Grey, Ann Morgan, and Peggy Shaw. When they got to Joan Crawford, they were financially secure. MGM later made up a story about a “little crippled lady in Albany” who won the contest, which Crawford believed till her dying day. She did, however, hate the name “Crawford,” which she thought sounded like “crawfish.” Later she came to love it and felt she’d been lucky in the contest.

† Maybe the final prize in this category goes to Max Showalter. The successful character actor and Broadway musical comedy star was born in Kansas as Max Showalter. His studio, 20th Century–Fox, changed this to Casey Adams, a more star-ish name for his 1950s career in the movies. When Casey went back to Broadway, he changed back, starring as Horace Vandergelder in *Hello, Dolly!* as Max Showalter. He had substantial careers under two different names.

* Warren G. Harris, in his biography *Clark Gable*, details how MGM gave Gable new dentures, restyled his hair, plucked his eyebrows, and built up his physique. Harris quotes MGM publicist Howard Strickling on Gable: “He was willing to be molded. He wanted to be a star. He wanted to be a success.” Harris adds that portrait photographer George Hurrell pointed out that Gable “looked good from any angle,” adding that “most people have a good side and bad side, best from one angle only. Gable could be photographed under any lighting conditions, any camera angle.”

* Lake’s loose hair was an example of Hollywood visual logic: loose hair, loose morals. Audiences got the message.

† In fact, in the 1980s Paramount Studios publicist Teet Carle claimed Lake’s “safety hairdo” (a.k.a. her “victory hairdo”) had been such an effective campaign that it had been written up as factual in the Navy Department Safety Bulletin mailed out to war plants. The story and photo became a major media event.

‡ The publicity departments had a tricky twofold task: keeping the newcomer’s name in the eye of the public in the right way and out of the public’s eye in the wrong way. For the latter, they bought off policemen, bribed newspapermen, and paid hush money under the

table to cooks, maids, and nannies—something they did for both stars and stars-in-the-machine.

* These “controlled” interviews disappeared by the 1960s, and stars began to be treated as oracles. Brando said, “Today once you are a star, people start asking you about politics, astronomy, archaeology, and birth control.” Author Scott Berg commented on what was lost when stars were no longer taught what to say to reporters: “Clark Gable seemed fascinating all his life because there wasn’t so much information about him. Today you’re on television all the time...In the old days, the audience never got tired of the star...or at least it took a lot longer.”

* There were always, of course, movie tie-ins: paper dolls, figurines, clothing lines. My favorite movie tie-in fashion outfit is the “Saint Joan jumper,” from 1957. Jean Seberg modeled it, and ads claimed it was “made with Texet Knitting Wool.” Suitable, no doubt, for wearing to be burned at the stake.

† Today, of course, movie stars must confine their advertising work to Japan if they are to retain any credibility.

* I confess to adoring these ads and all the fashion advice of the movie mags of the 1940s. My favorite no-nonsense fashion adviser was *Modern Screen*’s Marjorie Bailey. Her tongue-in-cheek write-ups—meant to be taken very seriously—are often hilarious: “Yep, dirndls are still with us...maybe you think I’m asleep on my feet because I don’t tell you to head for one...No, pal. No.”

* These lessons, the studios felt, were freebies that they generously doled out while even *paying* newcomers to take them.

* If a newcomer had been pushed forward rapidly, like Eleanor Powell, these lessons still were part of her day. In particular, Eleanor Powell had to be taught to *dance* for the camera and the editing process. She had to realize her number would be cut into parts that varied shots showing her full frame with shots eliminating her dancing feet and giving her a close-up. Her choreography had to include these cutaways. She would also have to perform her numbers with the orchestra, so they could record her music at the perfect tempo; then perform her number as four cameras photographed it, with no sound except her playback recording; and later dub her taps so as to capture perfect sound. Powell was always her own stand-in, since no one else could do her elaborate routines.

† Gable was loaned only one other time, to Columbia in 1934 for his Oscar-winning performance in Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night*, a punishment for what Louis B. Mayer felt was Gable’s bad attitude. Gable’s 1931 release *Night Nurse* was from Warners but was

not a loan-out. He came to MGM *after* he made it. It had been made earlier and held up in release. *Gone with the Wind* was not a loan-out because although it was David O. Selznick's production, MGM was the distributor.

* Shirley Temple, who appeared with Colbert in *Since You Went Away*, described how it worked. When Temple moved so that Colbert's dreaded right side came into the frame (it was her left side she favored), "Suddenly [Colbert] reached out and grabbed my chin. Firmly holding my head faced away from the camera, she rotated herself to a left exposure. She would not tolerate any tricks."

* Garson was not a beginner. She had well earned her Oscar nominations in *Mr. Chips* and *Blossoms in the Dust* (1941), and she was a mature woman with a considerable theatrical career behind her. Crawford, on the other hand, had come up from the very bottom and had not yet proven her acting chops, despite her fame.

* See part III: "Retooling for World War II," which discusses the careers of Van Johnson and June Allyson.

† The studio ruthlessly didn't care whether Johnson or Drake made it—and all the better if they both did. The two young men had both appeared in small roles in *The White Cliffs of Dover* in early '44, when they were not yet known. *White Cliffs* was released in May, followed by *Two Girls and a Sailor* in June. MGM then capitalized on both successes—the studio released four more Drake films in 1944: *Maisie Goes to Reno* and *Mrs. Parkington* in September, *Marriage Is a Private Affair* in October, and *Meet Me in St. Louis* (Drake's signature film) in November. They had already put a second Van Johnson film out just before *Two Girls: Three Men in White*, a late-May release. For Johnson, the follow-up movie was a prestige film, *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, released in November. Thus, both Johnson and Drake went from small roles to stardom in only one year's time, with *Two Girls and a Sailor* making the difference.

* When his MGM contract ran out in 1949, he did some TV, some theatre, drifted to England—nothing really clicked for him. He died from lung cancer in 1982 at the age of sixty-four, not having acted since 1975.

* Even when a "Hollywood stardom" movie was a comedy, there could be a grim reality on parade underneath the jokes, as in *Stand-In* (1937), *Once in a Lifetime* (1932), and *Boy Meets Girl* (1938). *Star Dust* (1940) was a fictionalized version of how a little Texas girl became Linda Darnell—starring Linda Darnell. It was designed to be a happy-ending piece, but it nevertheless had a pall of hypocrisy, chicanery, and waste written all over it. Another example, *Make Me a Star* (1932), is supposed to be hilarious, but it's practically a

tragedy. The story is a variation on *Merton of the Movies*, a novel that became a vehicle for Harold Lloyd in the same year (*Movie Crazy*) and would later be remade for Red Skelton in 1947 under its original title. *Make Me a Star*, competing with Lloyd's successful version in the same year, is largely forgotten, but it's a revealing presentation of the sad efforts of the untalented to become movie stars. Its small-town hero (Stu Irwin) takes a "National Correspondence Academy" course in movie acting. (Lesson #4 is the "Western Hero Course.") Irwin, inspired by #4, changes his name to "Whoop Rider" and goes to Hollywood to make his fortune. Surveying "Whoop," Joan Blondell, as a studio professional, solemnly says, "He's just another good grocery clerk gone wrong."

The "star is born" movie is in contrast to the optimistic musical success stories in which a leading lady breaks a leg and the youngster gets her big chance, or the freshman guy wins the big game, or invents something, because these are not stories about the manufacturing process of stardom. Telling the tale of movie stardom is telling a voodoo story that sells dreams to the huddled masses but reassures them it's all a load of clams.

PRODUCT AND TYPE



Humphrey Bogart before he opened Rick's Café Americain, as a mad doctor in *The Return of Dr. X*.

Ricardo Montalban, a handsome Mexican actor brought to Hollywood in the 1940s, grasped the situation he was in at once. "The product was not any individual movie," he said. "It was the actor. They created a persona that they thought the public would like...it was amazing."

Well, it *was* amazing. Every successful movie star became a specific type that the audience endorsed. The type needed to be right for its times, it needed to seem natural to the star, and it needed to become so welded to the star that it seemed not to be a role at all but a secret peek into what that actor was really like. Whether they found the actor's type in a first role (Deanna Durbin) or after years of searching (Humphrey Bogart), they had to find it.

The star machine made only one product—a movie star—but the studios, smart about salesmanship, knew that the products mustn't be identical. There would be no lasting profit in that. Movie stars had to be different, not only from the moviegoing public but also from one another. Hollywood increased the longevity, adoration, and ultimate monetary values of the stars the machine made by giving the public a variety of types to choose from—a General Motors, as it were, of movie star merchandise.

Today, scholars, critics, and magazine writers define a movie star's "type" by calling it "persona." "Persona"—typecasting with its hat on—means the creation of a second self that is believed to be the original self. (It was a word unknown in old Hollywood.) Today we can understand that some movie star "types" were so utterly believable in their particular roles—and they lasted so long playing them—that we can cut them out of the herd and say that, in fact, these unique personalities really do have what we can call a special "persona."* Nevertheless, they, like everyone else, would originally have had to deal with a star machine that thought of them as a product. For those who are movie legends, the elevated few, their "persona" that we "see" today is less a fact than it is an accolade we bestow in retrospect. "Persona," simply stated, is highly successful typecasting, a product with a very long shelf life.

Sadly, Hollywood's typecasting is often believed to reflect a lack of talent. "Clark Gable can't act, so he always played the same guy, and that's because that's the only guy he *could* play."† The business saw it differently. They knew Clark Gable always played the same guy because that was the guy the public wanted him to play—and "that guy" *was* a performance. It was such a good performance, in fact, that people believed it. The studios learned that to succeed, actors had to "become" the role, because film was an up-close, in-the-dark, one-on-one, *intimate* medium. This is both the glory of movie stardom and its curse. When people want to describe the appeal of a star, the words are very flattering: unique, talented, memorable, believable, honest. But when they want to criticize a star, they say "He just plays himself." Movie stars, it's sometimes

thought, not only don't act, they can't act. While many movie stars were indeed actors with limited skills (by the standards of the theatre), making an audience really believe (in close-up) that you are the character you're playing may be the hardest kind of acting there is. No one expects to leave the theatre having been convinced that Laurence Olivier is really a Danish prince who's a bit indecisive and that he was generously sharing with us how that looked and felt to him. Yet that is what movie audiences (and the studios) expected from a movie star.*

The question shouldn't be, Can movie stars act? The question should be, Are they believable on-screen? John Cromwell, a director who worked with many of the biggest names in film (Cary Grant, Carole Lombard, Barbara Stanwyck, Irene Dunne, Bette Davis, Humphrey Bogart, Charles Boyer, Hedy Lamarr, Ronald Colman, Claudette Colbert, Tyrone Power, and more), commented, "All of these people could act, some, of course, better than others. But the point is, the audience *believed* in them. That's what movies call acting. People forget that acting for film is different from acting in the theatre."

Lucille Ball said, "What you were encouraged to do at the studios was to become a flapper girl, a glamour girl, or some type. You were that type of girl belonging to that type of picture. It was very limiting." It was limiting, but it was the price of movie stardom. Furthermore, the studios considered it the crowning achievement for a performer. If an audience responded to the actor or actress as a type—and they liked that type—they'd pay money to see it many times. The public wanted to go to the diner that made meatloaf the way they wanted it made—no curries, glazes, or *à la françaises*, please. The public wanted to know what it was going to get for its money. "Give me Clark Gable as Clark Gable in a Clark Gable kind of movie." In old Hollywood, everything audiences knew about star "types" they learned by accumulation, by going to movie after movie. Roles were added up to create an unarticulated dialogue between fans and the star on-screen. It was a high level of nonverbal communication, yet a simple language of sex, desire, and pleasure that everyone could speak. Ultimately, all you needed to write a

movie character was: Bang! Door opens. It's *Clark Gable*. Everyone knew whom they were looking at and what his character would be. As Alfred Hitchcock put it, "Casting is characterization." Once star products were typed, the factory knew how to build movies around them, and they could do it rapidly and economically.

After Marlene Dietrich became "Marlene Dietrich"—the exotic, the androgynous, the foreign—and was understood as such, no lengthy explanations about her characters were needed to bog down her plots. When she first appears in *Manpower*, fresh out of prison and ready to fall in love with George Raft but marrying Edward G. Robinson (his fate was always to marry them when they loved someone else), it is understood that she will behave selfishly (marry Robinson), sin (go for Raft), redeem herself (try to be honest, go away, and leave the poor man alone), and earn the right to live happily ever after (having sex with Raft). The audience expects this, wants it, waits for it, and goes home satisfied that they've seen a Dietrich movie. Furthermore, because Dietrich is familiar, there is no explanation offered as to why she has a German accent. Hollywood, having developed her, did not need to explain her. Of course, she has a German accent—she's Dietrich! She's German! Everyone knew.

Star persona was a shared common knowledge for the audience. They didn't get it wrong because they had been clearly taught how to see (and thus interpret) the star presence. Did Bogart appear to be callous, unfeeling, a bad guy who wouldn't help out? Wrong! Everyone knew he just *seemed* to be that way until he changed. It enriched his story to have him *appear* bad, but it was reassuring to know in advance he wasn't really that way. In *Gilda* (1946), when Glenn Ford tells Rita Hayworth he hates her and she replies, "Hate is a very powerful emotion. I hate you, too. I hate you so much I can hardly stand it," we all know to be on *her* side, full of sympathy, because it means she really loves him. She's *Gilda*, and she's ever so misunderstood (especially when she's stripping in public to "Put the Blame on Mame"). We learned many movies ago that Rita Hayworth is easily mistaken for a bad woman because she's so erotic, but that she's really swell underneath. Typecasting became screenwriting

shorthand and created an intimate layer of shared subtexts between audience and star.

Type usually needed gradations and shades to it (though not for the Shirley Temples and the Rin Tin Tins). There's the general category (tough guy, girl next door, sex symbol, romantic hero, et cetera), but the star that fits one of these labels has to bring something personal to it—a soupçon of glamour, originality, imagination—or make it really sexy. Thus, you had Jimmy Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, George Raft, and Bogart all in the “tough guy” category. For a time, they were all at the same studio, Warner Bros. Why would Warners want four tough guys? Because Cagney, Robinson, Raft, and Bogart weren't just four tough guys. They were four movie stars who had been typecast as tough guys, but each had shaded the cliché into something of his own. These guys were not the same and could never be mistaken for one another. Ironically, being typecast liberated their uniqueness. Cagney was wired and dangerous. Robinson was smart and cynical. Raft was sexy and sensuous. Bogart was weary and philosophical. But all were tough about it. What the practical business thought of as simply “typecasting”—an outward, quotidian function like “tough guy”—can today be analyzed for the mysterious inner workings that happened between an actor and the celluloid. There's mathematics there, but also moonlight. The moviemaking business understood the mathematics (and took its chances on the moonlight).

Most stardoms began in these generalized types like “tough guy,” “all-American girl,” “sex symbol,” “gentlemanly leading man.” It was the subtle refinement to the category—à la Bogart, Cagney, Robinson, and Raft—that created the true star and ultimately, possibly, the legend. Yet one of Hollywood's most successful actors of the 1930s didn't have that specialized category—and certainly not that subtlety—and he still found a way to make the system work for him. Since Paul Muni didn't appear to be someone who was going to become a movie star, he confiscated *that* category and made it his general type. “I am not a movie star,” was his self-definition, and he refined it with a subtext that said, “because I am a very great and serious actor unlike those other people.” Amazingly,

this worked for him. Though he made only twenty-three movies, he earned one Oscar and four nominations for Best Actor. Muni's "type" was, in fact, a bit of a con, since Muni (that is, *Mr. Paul Muni*, as he was billed for *The Life of Emile Zola* [1937]) had two acting selves: with makeup or without. "Without" Muni roles were some of his best performances, including such excellent movies as *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932), *Scarface* (1932), *Bordertown* (1935), and *We Are Not Alone* (1939). These were modern roles in which his sturdy body and fairly handsome looks were put to good use. "With makeup" was when Muni put on his whiskers, or his sombrero, or his Asian eyelids. In these frequently outrageous performances, he took on accents the way a leaky rowboat takes on water, adopted mannerisms, and bowed and scraped and minced and pranced like a road company Laurence Olivier. (In fact, it might be said that he was Olivier before there was an Olivier.) Muni could be a real headache, but everyone took him seriously, so the machine, not being stupid, just left him alone.* Muni's mojo was working, so why tamper with it? To be fair, it's to Muni's credit that he found a way to carve out his own territory in a world of handsome competition. He wasn't a Gable, although he could play a lover of women; he wasn't a Cagney, although he could be very tough; and he wasn't a Tracy, although he could espouse noble sentiments as needed. He found his type by not becoming a type.

Gary Cooper lasted for decades because he developed a type that incorporated its own opposite. His image today is sometimes defined as an actor whose dialogue was "yep" and "nope," but it's astonishing to review his filmography and see how often he played a sly con artist who could talk himself out of any jam (*The Westerner*) or a character who articulates the most important issues of a film (*The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell*). Cooper had impeccable comic timing, as well as the capacity to convey deeply felt pain. He could play a real hick—shy and clumsy—or the ultimate sophisticate. He could act cowardly as well as heroic. He was unquestionably one of Hollywood's sexiest men on-screen, but he could make himself believable as a guy who had no idea what to do around a woman. After he reached the top, he was absolutely "Gary Cooper" on-

screen, and recognized as such, yet he played many real-life modern heroes with great credibility: Lou Gehrig, Billy Mitchell, Dr. Corydon Wassell, Sergeant Alvin York. He was able to make his audiences see *them* and not “Gary Cooper.” (Director Andre de Toth said, “Whatever he did, Gary Cooper was the truth.”)

It was Cooper’s appearance in Frank Capra’s 1936 *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* that elevated him to the top. Deeds became Cooper’s template. The character was a small-town American who was naïve yet shrewd; corny, yet poetic; shy, yet sexy; and who could slide down a banister with boyish glee, yet be brought into a painful catatonic state by the cruelty of the corrupt city people he encountered. Although he didn’t win the Oscar for *Deeds*, the two movies he *did* win Oscars for are riffs on that role: *Sergeant York* and *High Noon*. As York, he’s *Mr. Deeds Goes to War*, a hick who turns out to be better at the game being played than those who first laugh at his efforts; as Sheriff Will Kane in *High Noon* (*Mr. Deeds Goes West*), he’s forced to face down the bad guys with no one to help him but the woman who loves him. Although his portrayal of Deeds defined him, it never strangled him. He found endless shadings for it. In one of Cooper’s last movies, *Ten North Frederick* (1958), his role is that of a sad and aging Mr. Deeds, the one for whom no Jean Arthur stayed the course at his side, the one who *didn’t* win out over the corrupt money-grubbers who duped him. Gary Cooper had a rare gift—he seemed to be himself when he was Mr. Deeds, and Mr. Deeds seemed to be Gary Cooper no matter what era, what genre, or what shading any film laid over his presence. Cooper’s stardom is grounded in flexibility, a male/female ambivalence that gives him a subtle range that’s often hidden under the surface of his considerable movie star glamour.

Typecasting was discussed and planned for any newcomer right from the very beginning of his or her buildup. Yet it was also the step that depended on the public’s responses and perceptions. The studio’s job was to present the hopeful in a variety of different kinds of roles during the buildup; the public’s job was to choose its favorite of those *types*. For example, the public found out fast whether it liked Jean Harlow better as a rich society girl (as in

Platinum Blonde [1931]) or a chippie on the make (*Red-Headed Woman* [1932]), and it would write fan mail to the studios and say so. It was the studio's job to respond to this. ("Better cast Jean Harlow as another sexy mama.") The final control rested with the public.

Hollywood bosses, however, weren't about to let any part of star making get away from them if they could help it. Although they realized it would be the *public* that would crown a star with popularity and endorse a type, they still created a business plan for the typecasting process. They reversed engines. Whereas control during the buildup was kept inside the studio and evaluated according to how things were going with the dance lessons, the plants, and the star bios, control in typecasting was exercised passive-aggressively by learning and then mirroring the public's point of view. Moviegoers watching stars in progress often had little sense of this manipulation. They thought they were making their own private discoveries about stars, but they were, of course, working from a preselected menu. The studios knew that a moviegoer's amazing "stars are born because I found them" response to their products could be identified, tracked, and capitalized on. Usually, it involved three key movies: the one in which the audience first noticed and responded to the acting presence; the one in which they "discovered" the type they really wanted the actor to play, securing stardom; and the one that repeated the "magic" role in which the "discovery" had taken place and nailed down the type that had triggered the response so that the studio could make the star constantly repeat it.* This "three key movies to type" is well demonstrated by Errol Flynn's career. *Captain Blood* brought him to the public's attention and they responded enthusiastically to him; *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936) defined his stardom and located him where audiences wanted him to be; and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) forever secured his type as an adventurous devil-may-care personality, a face-danger-with-a-grin kinda guy who could also be a graceful lover. The years 1935 to early 1938 took Flynn from unknown to star to type. With *Robin Hood*, he was

locked into position as “Errol Flynn,” and audiences understood what that meant.

Humphrey Bogart’s career in the 1930s shows how long a studio might work to locate type. Throughout the decade, Bogart played a series of gangsters, a casting that grew out of his stage success playing Duke Mantee in 1936’s *The Petrified Forest* (a role he repeated in the movie version). But Warners tried him out in other ways, too, because they felt they might be able to turn him into an all-purpose character actor for their stock company. (He didn’t seem to be a romantic leading man.) Bogart was cast as everything from a mad scientist, in *The Return of Doctor X* (1939), running around with a skunk stripe in his hair, to the “Irish” stable keeper in Bette Davis’s *Dark Victory* (1939). It was against all odds that, suddenly, in 1941, he would become the quintessential cynical American tough-guy romantic existentialist hero. When George Raft turned down the leading male role of Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), the part was given to Bogart, who then found his type. His career is a great example of how the actor becomes the character and the character in turn becomes the actor. After Bogie’s star type was found, he grew to be a legend.*



Finding the right type for an actor could be a problem:

...Gary Cooper without his horse, mustachioed and foppish in *Peter Ibbetson*.



Finding the right type for an actor could be a problem:
...Two stars in the wrong hats: Clark Gable with a bowler in *Parnell*
and James Cagney with a tall beaver in *Frisko Kid*.



And remembering not to “cast against type” was sometimes hard, too:

...Katharine Hepburn, a long way from Philadelphia, as a barefooted Ozark mountain faith healer in *Spitfire*...



And remembering not to “cast against type” was sometimes hard, too:

and Ginger Rogers, the perfect sassy modern gal, all costumey and grand as Dolly Madison in *Magnificent Doll*.

Bogart wasn't the only legendary star of the past who frequently wasn't cast the way we think of him. We can look back and see Katharine Hepburn playing a faith-healing Ozark Mountains girl (really scary), Cary Grant as a javelin thrower, Gary Cooper as Peer Gynt, Rosalind Russell as a drab secretary—all roles played during the search for type. Many stars underwent fairly long periods not being given a chance, never being moved up to the star plateau, simply because no one really could understand who they might become on-screen. John Wayne spent a decade as a singing cowboy. Jane Wyman, a fine actress, played ditzy blond chorus girls. Lucille

Ball was cast as a clotheshorse, and Myrna Loy had an entire “Eurasian” beauty period. What looks obvious to us today often wasn’t so obvious at the beginning of a star’s development period. Even an actor as utterly distinctive as James Cagney was questioned. Today, it might seem to us as if there could never be any doubt about the roles he might play, but Cagney was an accomplished song-and-dance man, as well as both a serious actor and a good comedian. There were decisions to be made about what direction to take him. Since he wasn’t a traditional romantic hero, the studio wondered if he could ever be cast as a real leading man for their glamour girls. (He was short, and he gave off dangerous vibrations.) Anyone today who wants to think Cagney’s “type” was always predictable might want to check him out in *Frisco Kid* (1935) to see how he looks in a curly wig, mustache, ruffled blouse, satin waistcoat, and full period garb. He’s on the Barbary Coast and fighting his way to the top—they got that right—but James Cagney in ruffles? Like everyone else, he had some oddball assignments while his perfect type was being secured. (He seemed pretty urban playing a cowboy in *The Oklahoma Kid* [1939].)

Once upon a time, Edward Arnold was a leading man billed over Cary Grant, even though Arnold was short, heavysset, middle-aged, and Grant was tall, slim, very handsome, and full of youth. Grant had not found “Cary Grant” yet. The movie was *The Toast of New York* (1937). Grant is present to play the romantic lead opposite Frances Farmer, but Arnold, nobody’s idea of a dashing hero, is the star; Grant just gets the girl. Arnold had played a similar role in a successful 1936 movie, *Come and Get It*, in which the Cary Grant role was played by Joel McCrea, also opposite Frances Farmer. That movie led to the creation of a similar story the following year. Farmer and Arnold were needed to repeat their roles, but McCrea could easily be replaced by Grant. Neither McCrea nor Grant had yet found the type he would eventually become, and thus both were interchangeable as the “love interest” to play with Farmer in a movie starring Edward Arnold. (Immediately following *The Toast of New York*’s July release, Grant emerged as the Cary Grant we know today by appearing in the two other 1937 movies that would define

his breakthrough: *Topper* [August 1937] and *The Awful Truth* [November 1937].)

Many successful movie stars in the studio system never located what we would now see as “a strong persona.” They did, however, find a casting type and *were* stars, just less distinct, less personalized than a Garbo or a Cary Grant. They are the difference between machine-made product and legend. Like Eleanor Powell, they were products of a system that capitalized on their one basic talent. Take, for example, the short career of Mario Lanza. When Lanza, a load of egomaniacal blubber, turned up on MGM’s doorstep in 1949, no one had seen or heard anything like him since Nelson Eddy supplied the voice for a singing whale. But Lanza was young (twenty-eight), nice looking, lively, and he had an amazing tenor voice. What’s more, the studio was looking for a male star who could sing opposite their freshly developed “operatic” singer, Kathryn Grayson. MGM saw right away that Lanza could be perfect, even though he had no acting experience and was too rough-edged to appear in movies directly based on real operas. MGM knew that he would, of course, sing—but what type was he going to be? He looked like a truck driver. Voilà! Mario Lanza debuted in movies playing the starring role opposite Kathryn Grayson in *That Midnight Kiss* (1949)—and he was a singing truck driver! Then he was a singing fisherman, and then a singing buck private, and pretty soon he was on the cover of *Time* magazine and playing Enrico Caruso in one of the biggest box office hits of the year, *The Great Caruso* (1951). Lanza’s stardom soared. (Later, it crashed. He made eight hit movies in ten years, but was dead by age thirty-eight.)

Lanza’s career came straight out of “Movie Types for Dummies.” The studio solved the Lanza problem by realizing his “type” was never going to be anything but “great loud singer.” They did not need to look any further. There was not going to *be* any nuance. The studio was smart enough to accept this and market him that way. A Lanza role could be anything or nothing, because all he really had to do was sing. Like Eleanor Powell, Mario Lanza was predefined by nature; all the machine had to do was find him, recognize his type, and use it.*

Many of these vaguely typed stars, who were very popular in their day but are less known now, explain the studio system and its star machine better than the legends, who are unique. Year by year, Hollywood turned out great numbers of movies. In 1946, there were 477 American-made titles released, and in 1934 there had been 678. Hollywood needed many movie stars to populate them all! It needed its Priscilla Lanes and its George Brents. They aren't the glory brigade, the first team, but they *were* movie stars with their own loyal fans, their own starring vehicles, their own types. They were *serviceable*. Without dismissing their beauty or talent, it is possible to label them as true "machine product."

Two popular stars under contract at the tough-minded Warners studio are examples of how a minor star could flourish by developing a less-than-dynamic type that could move easily from genre to genre. They are Dennis Morgan and Ann Sheridan. Morgan and Sheridan were stars at Warner Bros. in the late 1930s and 1940s and into the 1950s. Morgan was a very successful property for the studio, yet he isn't the kind of actor that today is associated with the studio. (He isn't a "tough guy.") Sheridan was a true glamour girl and a very distinctive presence. She was called "the oomph girl" (a nickname she hated), and her name once appeared alongside those of the most famous 1940s pinup girls, the Grables, the Lamours, and the Hayworths.* (Both Morgan and Sheridan are largely forgotten, although their remaining fans are loyal.)

Dennis Morgan began to emerge in movies around 1936. His first big moment came that year in the MGM hit *The Great Ziegfeld*. Billed under his own name, Stanley Morner, Morgan was the "singer" for the big "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody" number, which featured a revolving cake and hundreds of beautiful females in a series of stunning costumes. Ironically, Morgan/Morner was dubbed! (This is an example of why people think Hollywood is insane: Hire a guy because he can sing, put him in a musical—and then dub him.) After his name was changed (because "Stanley" seemed effeminate and "Morner" had the dubious homonym "mourner"), Morgan appeared in a run of movies from 1937 to 1940 before his

breakthrough A-level role came opposite Ginger Rogers in *Kitty Foyle* (1941).

Morgan seemed inherently modern, which made him suitable as a Warner Bros. leading man. He was good-looking, with an easy style and a beautiful “Irish” tenor† perfect for musicals, although Warners liked to develop musical stars who could perform in other genres. Morgan looked as if he might be perfect in women’s films as a handsome co-star for their leading actresses. He might also do comedies, because of his amiable naturalness, and maybe even adventure dramas or westerns if he weren’t called on to duel or be too active. Warner Bros. cleverly tried Morgan out in all these forms and learned a valuable lesson: He *could* be an all-purpose roster star whenever a good-looking leading man with an easy charm was needed. That very simple concept—“handsome lead”—could be his type in a world of more uniquely delineated male stars. If you had Cagney, Bogart, and Robinson on your payroll, you *needed* a Dennis Morgan, an “ordinary” guy, to complement them. By 1941, when Morgan was loaned to RKO for *Kitty Foyle*, his home studio had no need to worry about his being cast unsympathetically as a society snob who would let poor Kitty down in the romance department. It would be okay for him to play a heel as long as it was dubbed “leading man.” Morgan’s most popular years were the 1940s, particularly the war years, when actors were scarce, and his twinkling eyes, musical ability, warm smile, and solid masculinity made him extremely valuable.

Kisses for Breakfast (1941) represents Morgan on the rise and illustrates how his star type was built. He is absolutely *the* male star (under the title) of this low-budget programmer, which doesn’t look low-budget owing to effective use of standing sets, furniture, props, and well-designed costumes. The movie is a silly screwball comedy with a plot concerning an amnesiac (Morgan) who gets caught in a double marriage to cousins (Jane Wyatt and Shirley Ross). He’s the center of the story, but more experienced players (Lee Patrick, Jerome Cowan, Una O’Connor, Louise Beavers, and Willie Best) are used to support him. The movie gets by on secondhand glamour and

lots of sexual innuendo. Morgan, a handsome young man, has not one but two beautiful young wives who are, as W. C. Fields said of his bride, Mae West, in *My Little Chickadee* (1940), “so new that they’re not unwrapped yet.” Women swoon, maids consult Ouija boards, and butlers slurp down the drinks they are supposed to be serving. It’s that kind of movie. But the point is that Morgan takes center frame and emerges as an easygoing, likable “Irish-type,” loaded with charm and sex appeal, who could sing. And Morgan *does* sing in *Kisses*. This makes no sense for the character he plays, except that since he has a beautiful voice and Warners is selling him to the public, he sings.* Dennis Morgan paid off for Warners for nearly three decades, becoming successful in musicals, comedies, women’s films and melodramas, adventure movies—even westerns. He *was* generically flexible, and his type filled a basic need by *being* basic studio male product.

Although Morgan wasn’t a typical Warners tough guy, Ann Sheridan ironically *was*. She was the Warners’ resident glamour girl tough guy. Since she was under contract at the “tough guy” studio, she was often used to play the leading lady opposite a roster of male actors whom she matched up with in a kind of telepathically transmitted sense of “I can take it.” The men dished it out; she took it—and gave it back. Watching her sparring with Cagney in *Torrid Zone* (1940) is like being in a front-row seat at an Ali-Frazier fight. And watching her match up to Cary Grant—the acid test for female co-stars in comedy—in their 1949 hit *I Was a Male War Bride* often startles audiences who aren’t familiar with her consummate skill at telling off a man who’s trying to get in her pants. (Grant and Sheridan were a marvelous match and should have been paired again. She was an excellent foil for the older Grant in the world of changing women’s roles.) Warners worked Sheridan’s stardom the same way they did Morgan’s. They cast her in all kinds of movies, and she maintained her down-to-earth nature across genres just as Morgan kept his “easy Irish guy” in many different movies. Sheridan is musically a tough guy in *Shine On Harvest Moon* (1944), a waitress tough guy in *They Drive by Night* (1940), a women’s film tragic tough guy in *Nora Prentiss* (1947), a comically tough guy in *George*

Washington Slept Here (1942), a glamorously tough guy in *The Doughgirls* (1944), a noirishly tough guy in *The Unfaithful* (1947), and a westernly tough guy in *Silver River* (1948).

Sheridan was born as Clara Lou Sheridan in a small Texas town. She was redheaded, strong-minded, and uncommonly pretty. She was making her own living in Hollywood in 1933 by the age of eighteen. She was that classic staple of the business, the beauty contest winner. One of her sisters had submitted her photo to the “Search for Beauty” contest conducted by Paramount in late 1932. (“I was a ‘Search for Beauty’ girl,” she once told John Kobal. “They’re still searching, mind you.”) She was one of thirty winners who were given a trip to Hollywood, out of whom an elite six were given Paramount contracts. Slender and lovely, Sheridan nevertheless conveyed a kind of heaviness to audiences—the heaviness that comes with having had to fight through all kinds of situations. She seemed confident, unhesitant, and she wore the experience of having fought off men as if it were a Girl Scout badge. Delivered in a low, somewhat masculine voice, her “Oh, yeah, buster?” was tough but also kindhearted and warm. She never seemed genuinely hard, only cheerfully realistic. She had a sense of humor about herself, a permanently amused quality. Though she was tough, she was never mean.

Sheridan could dance a little and sing well enough to get by. This broadened her castability. She could play in musicals as well as comedies and dramas, and she was built to wear the insane clothes of the 1940s. She was one gal who could carry off any crazy getup, no matter what was stuck on her—feathers, chunky jewelry, or portfolio-sized purses. As with Eleanor Powell, no outfit ever wore Ann Sheridan.



Dennis Morgan, all-purpose star.



Ann Sheridan, his female counterpart.



Morgan and Sheridan together in a successful period musical, *Shine On Harvest Moon*, meant the studio got twice as much for its money.

Today, Sheridan doesn't get the credit she deserves. Actresses who had a hard edge to them or a hint of the backroom experience were seldom leading ladies unless they were Mae West or Jean Harlow. (And both West's and Harlow's approach to this backroom aura was comic.) Female stars like Sheridan were usually sidekicks—Una Merkel, Eve Arden—or chippies like Veda Ann Borg or brainless blondes like Toby Wing. Sheridan elevated the type, moving it above the title. She represented something real, and the Warners roster needed her to match its very grounded leading men. Like them, she seemed to have been there and back and lived to laugh about it. Sheridan had a limited talent, but the combination of her singing, her glamorous looks, and her ability to deliver a tough line with humor made her a perfect studio contract player. In an obituary tribute, the *Times* of London said of Sheridan: "Without

ever quite achieving the mythic status of a superstar, she was always a pleasure to watch, and, as with all true stars, was never quite like anyone else.”

Walter Pidgeon is another example of the low-key movie star type. He was timeless, a universal presence to be plugged into any kind of movie. Like a Dennis Morgan or an Ann Sheridan, he had generic flexibility. He could be the romantic lead, the villain, the father, the best friend, the husband, the romantic rival, a historical figure, a sage older counselor—Pidgeon could even sing. His age seemed to remain the same for more than twenty-five years. He was utterly reliable, very popular, and he had his type: dignified but not stuffy handsome older man. He’s not particularly well known today, perhaps because he’s not edgy enough, or perhaps because he has become thought of as an appendage to Greer Garson, having been successfully co-starred with her in eight films.*

The difference between a successfully typecast actor like Pidgeon and a legendary star can be grasped by comparing Pidgeon and Cary Grant. They appear together in MGM’s 1953 *Dream Wife*, with Deborah Kerr. At this point, neither Pidgeon nor Grant is a young man. Both are solidly established. Grant started in movies in 1932 and Pidgeon in 1926. Both of them look fabulous: trim, elegant, confident, sexy. They are relaxed and humorous about themselves. They are both the absolute epitome of the movie-made desirable older man, but Grant leans toward the youthful side of the coin, Pidgeon the older. Grant makes a charming mockery of the idea of the eligible older man, putting a little body English on it. He’s casual, slightly iconoclastic, even a bit naughty in his attitude. He’s established a second self within the frame, and he stands aside, creating a special ironic relationship with the viewer, as if it’s all a game being played between him and the audience. Pidgeon leans more toward the rules of proper behavior, always maintaining his dignity, or at least the outward semblance of it. There is no postmodern irony in his performance. Either one could be the perfect elegant man that women dream of, but Grant brings something extra to the table. That’s why he’s a legend and Pidgeon is only a movie star.

There are a great many examples of the Pidgeon-Morgan-Sheridan kind of popular players who kept the factory humming. In their day they were the equals of—or even superior in fan response to—some of the legends we recognize today. One can find in any fan magazine of the 1940s stars whom no one talks about now—for instance, Priscilla Lane, of the Lane Sisters. Her sisters Rosemary and Lola also had solid careers, but Priscilla (like Patti of the Andrews Sisters) stood out and carried the family standard. Today her career seems hard to explain. She's not *that* good and not *that* pretty. She can sing and dance a bit, but her chief attraction seems to be her ordinariness. The contrast between her and June Allyson, also known for her “ordinariness,” is huge. Allyson was never really ordinary; she just knew how to pretend she was. Lane, who is never fully at ease in front of the camera, truly *was* ordinary. What she had going for her was that blond, softly rounded face that was popular in the late 1930s and that can be seen in Cecelia Parker, Mary Beth Hughes, and even Lana Turner. It was a look that also worked for the early 1940s. Many stars rode to the top on that horse: They were right for their times. Lane had an unpretentious, natural quality. Hers was a particular 1940s wartime America look—thick hair, a clear and radiant complexion, a natural smile, a good figure, a decent rather than sensuous quality.* Lane was a star who was right not only for her times, but also for her studio, Warners, which cast her successfully as an “ordinary” decent girl opposite John Garfield, Bogart, and Cagney.

All the studios were adept at building useful stars like Sheridan, Morgan, Pidgeon, and Lane. Twentieth Century-Fox had one of the most spectacular, the gorgeous Linda Darnell. She was dreamy-looking as a young girl, softly beautiful, almost ethereal. (It was her face that was used to represent the Virgin Mary in *The Song of Bernadette* [1943].) Darnell had a lovely voice with a trembling quality somewhat like Marilyn Monroe's, although hers was lower and huskier. Unfortunately, she was not a great actress, and her exceptional beauty both gave her a career and limited her possibilities. She might have been bigger had she not been so angelic looking. Her beauty stimulated Fox to cast her generically—

as a beauty for any time, any place—rather than as a flesh-and-blood character. Her type was simply “beauty.” She could be a contemporary beauty, as in 1948’s *Unfaithfully Yours* (she’s the mirror in which Rex Harrison’s jealous composer sees his own insecurities reflected); a fantasy-ethnic beauty, as in 1946’s *Anna and the King of Siam* (in which she played the Siamese beauty Tuptim); and even, most successfully, a low-down and cheap beauty. In fact, she turned out to be a positively brilliant low-down and cheap beauty. I’m not talking about her leading role in the celebrated sex fling of its day, *Forever Amber* (1947), because the movie Amber wasn’t all that naughty. (Amber was presented as being much better than her betters, another girl with a heart of gold.) Darnell could shine when she was cast as a truly low-class, down-and-out babe who knew that her looks were her only bargaining chip. In *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949), while sexing up Paul Douglas and luring him into marriage through a holdout, Darnell explains it all: “What I got don’t need beads.” And in *Fallen Angel* (1945), she’s perfect as a hard-luck waitress in a small-town diner looking for the right man, any man, to be her ticket out of town. She saunters up behind the counter, chewing gum, pencil behind her ear, and sets down a cup of coffee as if it were a Sherman tank. Her bored, “I’ve heard it all, buster” attitude sums up a lifetime’s experience of aching feet and gnawing dreams.

But in all these incarnations, whether cheap or sweet, Linda Darnell *is*—and is no more than—exactly what she seems. The lifetime experience of aching feet and gnawing dreams, the beautiful Siamese ingenue, both are exactly that, and no more. Like Mario Lanza, Dennis Morgan, Ann Sheridan, and Walter Pidgeon, she is a *general* type.

ONCE SECURED, A STAR’S TYPE needed to be maintained. Things could become problematic when the studio messed with the type it so painstakingly had established. This might be done by mistake or even by design. The business could get greedy. After all, there would be even more money to be made if actors with types could

then be heavily publicized as “playing against type” in what the publicity flacks called “a departure.” Usually, this simply meant trying to put stars in genres they weren’t typically associated with. Darryl Zanuck, head of 20th Century–Fox, was always trying to get more out of his box office queen Betty Grable. He made it work once when he cast her in a nonmusical murder mystery, *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941), opposite Victor Mature. However, the film wasn’t all that much of a departure for her. She was playing her own familiar type—just not singing and dancing—and she does show off her famous legs in a bathing suit at a YMCA pool scene. (The film was also released in 1941, early in her Fox career, just before she reached the top of the heap and had not become fully known as “the Pinup Girl.”) In 1946, after Grable had become a top box office musical star, Zanuck wanted Grable to play a dipsomaniac whose dead body turns up in the Paris river in *The Razor’s Edge* (1946). She reportedly told him, “Are you kidding? Fans would expect me to rise up out of the water with lily pads in my hair, singing ‘Hooray for Hollywood.’”

Another star who understood what he had and didn’t have was the intelligent Edward G. Robinson: “Some people have youth, some people have beauty, I have menace.” In fact, many stars often had shrewd understandings of who they were and were not. “I’m no actor,” said Victor Mature, “and I have sixty-four films to prove it!” He knew he’d found stardom because of his looks. Gable said, “I’m no actor and I never have been.” Meg Ryan once said, simply and rather bitterly, “I twinkle.” (Grable herself said, “I became a star for two reasons, and I’m standing on them,” paraphrasing a famous line spoken to her character in Billy Rose’s *Diamond Horseshow* [1945]. Grable appropriated the words as her own self-evaluation. *)

Typecasting was a powerful box office tool. Once a star was labeled or defined, it was dangerous to try to extend the actor too far—and very dangerous to “cast against type.” The public didn’t like it and let everyone know about it. Cary Grant gave a great performance in the stark Clifford Odets drama *None But the Lonely Heart* (1944), but no one liked him as a tragic Cockney with a dying

mother (Ethel Barrymore). Gene Kelly fought the Mafia in the noirish *Black Hand* (1950), but everyone waited for him to start hoofing. Garbo was successfully forced to laugh in *Ninotchka* (1939), but she met her Waterloo when she had to dance the chica-choca rhumba in *Two-Faced Woman* (1941). Even Katharine Hepburn, at the height of her “you know I am not like those other women in the movies but a reahhly, reahhly serious actress” quality, played a Ninotchka-like role in a goofy Bob Hope comedy, *The Iron Petticoat* (1956). Her fans hated her for it—and so did Bob Hope’s. Sometimes the determination to cast actors in anything just to keep them working was ludicrous. Actor Pat O’Brien was firmly associated with his Irish name. He played Irish priests, cops, naval officers. When he was suddenly cast in *Crack-Up* (1946) as an art historian lecturing to a museum crowd and successfully X-raying paintings to prove them fake, no one really knew what to make of it. It seemed just plain *wrong*.

A classic example of casting against type is Clark Gable’s enormous failure playing Charles Parnell, the Irish Nationalist leader of the late 1880s. The ill-fated *Parnell*, released in 1937, co-starred Gable with Myrna Loy and remained throughout his lifetime one of Gable’s greatest embarrassments. He is awful in it, but *Parnell* would be a dull and stodgy film with or without him. Characters enter rooms and greet one another. “Hello, Charles.” “Hello, William.” “Hello, Aunt Ben.” It’s like a Bob and Ray routine. Gable, wearing muttonchop sideburns and trying to be grand, is stripped of everything that makes him exciting. He plays a noble politician who speechifies, who accepts defeat, and who woos his woman carefully and by the rules,* seriously violating his own well-established image. In his final scene, Gable languishes on a chaise longue beside a roaring fire that has more energy than he does. “It’s no use,” he says, seeming to play Walter Pidgeon, not Parnell. He walks around, calmly smoking his pipe, seldom raising his voice. His plan of attack? “I’ll wait.” His attitude toward himself? “What am I?” His response to failure? “Now that I am overthrown...” This isn’t the Gable people had grown to love. His one big moment of action, in which he socks a fellow politician, is performed almost

apologetically and in a highly dignified manner, deliberately and without passion. Gable is supposed to be the guy who kicks down the door to get to the girl, the guy who punches his way out of problems, the man's man. As Parnell, he is playing a man "who brought reason out of hysteria...the uncrowned king of Ireland." Talking reason? That wasn't Gable's style. And the only royalty that Gable represented was King of Hollywood, a man of the people. In *Parnell*, Gable is desexed, all his fires tamped down.[†]

Something similar happened to Greer Garson. During the war, she became an American sacred cow. She successfully created roles that are still beloved, such as her romantic heroine in *Random Harvest* (1942), her touching childless wife in *Blossoms in the Dust* (1941), her delicate and lyrical Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* (1940), and her solid portrait of a liberated scientist, *Madame Curie* (1943). In particular, she had become iconic in her title role as *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), the stalwart British housewife who stood strong against the Germans. All these roles convinced America that she was noble, brave, reverent, maybe even dull, but noble, brave, reverent. In real life, however, Garson was known for not taking herself too seriously on the set. She had a tart, fairly saucy sense of humor. (No less a cutup than Errol Flynn, who worked with her in *That Forsyte Woman* [1949], paid tribute to her in his autobiography by saying, "Greer Garson was the first actress I worked with who was fun.") And so a bad decision was made. In 1948, Garson was put into a screwball comedy called *Julia Misbehaves*. Because MGM thought the highly popular Garson could do anything and get away with it, they didn't worry that *Julia* was a "big change of pace" for her. The film turned out to be Greer Garson's *Parnell*. But whereas Gable had actually given a really bad performance in his flop, Garson, sadly, didn't. She actually *could* play comedy: She had excellent timing, and she could sing and dance passably. However, to audiences of the late 1940s, Garson was *Mrs. Miniver*. Seeing her jigging around onstage with a load of drunken sailors and riding the curtain like a burlesque queen was akin to seeing their moms join the circus. They did not want to see

Greer Miniver doing pratfalls in tights, sitting in a bubble bath, or on top of a pyramid of acrobats. (Walter Pidgeon, playing her former husband, watches Garson's acrobatic act and cries out, "She'll get hurt!" That's exactly how the audience saw it.) *Julia Misbehaves* was not welcome at the box office, despite pairing Garson with her most beloved co-star, Walter Pidgeon, and despite the presence of the exquisitely beautiful teenaged Elizabeth Taylor (as Garson's daughter). MGM learned something: The fans wanted Garson to keep her dignity. They would accept her as delicately comedic if she were playing in *Pride and Prejudice* opposite Laurence Olivier, but not if she were flailing around in screwball territory. Once a Mrs. Miniver or a Madame Curie, always a Miniver or a Curie. Garson was denied versatility.

Sometimes actors were said to have been "cast against type" when, in fact, they were taking their type beyond its limitations. For instance, when he was thirty-eight years old and an established leading man, Ray Milland won an Oscar (and was hailed for his "departure from type") for portraying a serious alcoholic in Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend* (1945). Milland, born in Wales as the elegant Reginald Truscott-Jones, had been seen on-screen for more than a decade as the epitome of the handsome aristocrat, or the easygoing young bon vivant with perfect manners, or the devil-may-care man-about-town, or even the charming con artist who has to learn to go straight—all variations on a theme. Whatever the shading, movies presented Milland as if he had been born to wear a tuxedo and deliver an acerbic line while smiling his devil of a smile and winning the leading lady over despite his little touch of cruelty. All done with a drink in his hand. Milland worked this type steadily throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, averaging three or four films per year. He often played a drunk scene—for laughs—and behaving in a naughty and rude manner was one of his skills. *Lost Weekend* used Milland's established type to allow him a performance depth that he hadn't been thought to possess. The role of an alcoholic, self-loathing journalist gave him *reasons* for his insolence, revealing tragedy behind his sarcasm, unmasking his "happy-go-lucky" disguise. Milland's young drunks had always been charming,

and Billy Wilder understood that drunks often *were* charming. Wilder also understood that Milland's ability to deliver a zingy line was related to an inherent sense of *meanness* beneath his surface.* He allowed Milland to play his usual charming drunk for a truth that earned him an Oscar. The role was not a departure. It was a maturation.†



Audiences liked a stiff-upper-lip and noble Greer Garson, as in *Mrs. Miniver*, not a “Hi, ya, sailors” kind of babe in *Julia Misbehaves*.



Ray Milland evolved over his long career from playing tuxedoed rich boys whose worst problem was “Should I kiss her now?” (with

Barbara Read in *Three Smart Girls*) to a desperate drunk who only had “Can I pawn my typewriter for a drink?” on his mind in *The Lost Weekend*.



There *were* maturations that broke with the original basic type and became permanent. Actor Dick Powell stopped playing boyish songsters in 1930s musicals like *Gold Diggers of 1933*, 1935, and 1937 and happy-go-lucky lovers in early 1940s comedies like *I Want a Divorce* and *Model Wife*. In 1945, he was cast as detective Philip Marlowe in *Murder, My Sweet*, and for six years he appeared in hard-boiled noir films like *Pitfall* and *Johnny O'Clock*. Powell felt he had matured past his juvenile musical persona, and he became a serious businessman who ended up directing movies as well as producing television series. Similarly, the supra-handsome John Payne changed his movie image from leading-hunk who supported Fox blondes like Alice Faye and Betty Grable to hard-boiled film noir protagonist in movies like *99 River Street* (1953) and *Kansas City Confidential* (1952). Payne, like Powell, was a first-rate businessman who moved into controlling his own projects, eschewing his background as a Hollywood pinup boy.✧

For the most part, studios stuck to what they knew worked. Once a star's type was set, the studios went out and sold it offscreen as well as on. They nailed star definitions down in the fans' minds by spelling them right out in movie magazine articles and photo captions. Star types were not secret or mysterious. They required no highfalutin interpretation. If you'd like to know what any single movie star's "persona" really *was* back then, all you have to do is read a movie magazine. The 1941 issue of *Movie Play* tells the fans that Veronica Lake is "a second Harlow." Spencer Tracy is "better with men than women...get him in a masculine crowd and he can swap stories and indulge in mantalk with the best of them." Rosalind Russell "regales a smart dinner party with her scintillating comments" because she is "sophisticated, exotic." Thus, fans were told Lake was going to be promoted as a sex symbol, Tracy was more popular with male fans than female, and Russell was a sophisticated comedienne.*

Further proof that the business understood typecasting also exists in movies that make jokes about it. When Warner Bros. made a lightweight satire about the movie business, *It's a Great Feeling* (1949), they riffed on the concept. Using their popular "Two Guys" stars,[†] Jack Carson and Dennis Morgan, they told a story about a girl, Judy Adams, who was trying to become a movie star. She is played by Doris Day, but Carson and Morgan play themselves. The setting is the real Warner Bros. studio. The movie opens with four real-life movie directors all refusing to direct a picture that stars Jack Carson: Raoul Walsh, King Vidor, Michael Curtiz, and David Butler. (The first in-joke is that Butler is the director of *It's a Great Feeling*.) As the "two guys" try to develop Day into a star, they move around the studio lot encountering various big-name Warners stars who make fun of their own studio images. Joan Crawford, knitting like a madwoman (which she did in real life while waiting to be called on set), suddenly slaps Carson and Morgan both hard on the face after telling them off. When they demand to know why, she cheerfully explains, "Oh, I do that in all my pictures." Edward G. Robinson begs a studio cop to help him look tough. ("I've got a

reputation!") Gary Cooper has a long conversation with Morgan at a soda fountain in which all he says is "yep!"

The greatest joke of all is the finale. Fed up with promises and failure, Day decides to go back to Gurkey's Corners, Wisconsin. She has been threatening from the beginning to "return home" and marry her high school sweetheart, Jeffrey Bushdinkle. Carson and Morgan follow her, watching her at-home wedding from the window. When Day kisses her new husband, the camera reveals his identity: It's Errol Flynn! After a moment's double take and shock, Carson says, "What some girls will go for! He's got nothin'!" "Nothin,'" solemnly echoes Morgan. When Warner Bros. made this movie in which the premise played with the specific types of their stars, there was no question but that the audience would get the jokes.

Throughout the Hollywood golden age, stars were occasionally asked to appear as "themselves," which was, of course, a role—a star pretending to be his developed star identity. This could be just a straightforward walk-on. Ava Gardner gets off a train in *The Band Wagon* (1953) as Fred Astaire's character Tony arrives. They say hi to each other, and Ava poses for photographers. She's Ava the person (also the star) playing Ava the star, with no layers other than the obvious one. Other times, the star appears as a sly little wink-wink joke for the audience. At the end of *Do You Love Me?* (1946), bandleader Harry James, playing the guy who didn't get the girl (Maureen O'Hara, who falls for Dick Haymes), has the final scene. Heartbroken, James walks out, a cab pulls up, and in the backseat sits *the* new girl for him—Betty Grable, in an unbilled cameo. There was no one in the audience who wouldn't recognize Betty Grable, the pinup queen and box office champion of World War II—and also, as it happens, the real-life wife of Harry James!*

In her glamour period, Lucille Ball plays herself in a full leading role in *Best Foot Forward* (1943). Ball is a movie star nicknamed "the Bathing Suit Girl," a title she was never actually known by. Yet her character is named Lucille Ball, and she is ostensibly playing herself. Her career is in the dumps, so she tries to give it a publicity jolt by going to a cadet military school to be their "senior prom girl." As

her agent says, “You’re the wonder girl from the never-never land. Who knows your option wasn’t picked up?” Ball’s real-life option had, of course, been picked up. At this point in her career, Ball is slim and spectacular in Technicolor, her red, red hair tucked into a leopard-skin hat, her red, red nails inches long, and her red, red mouth wide open in a high-wattage smile. She swans around in harem pants, waving a cigarette holder, and she’s everybody’s idea of what a 1940s glamour girl should look like. (People tend to forget how beautiful Ball was.) It takes guts to play yourself as a washed-up star who needs help to “crawl back from the end of the limb.” Ball does it with great style and credibility, but she plays it as comedy, gently spoofing herself and the system that made her while looking too good for any of it to seem true. If she hadn’t been a secure star, the role would not have worked, and if her type hadn’t been “Lucille Ball, successful movie star,” neither would her character.

Playing yourself as a concept bottomed out with the ultimate example—the spectacle of a drink-ravaged, aging John Barrymore playing a parody of himself in *The Great Profile* (1940). At a time in his life when the public knew Barrymore couldn’t remember *his* lines, he plays ham actor Evans Garrick, who can’t remember his. Barrymore is a cartoon version of the public’s awareness of “himself.” As the credits roll, a jolly chorus of male voices sing, “Oh, Johnny, how you can love,” spoofing the star’s reputation as “the Great Lover.” The play he is supposed to be appearing in is *Beloved Infidel*, a parody of his own *Beloved Rogue*. When the movie was released in 1940, critics bemoaned its painful humor. People knew then that Barrymore had toured in a play version of the story, and that he had barely been able to get through each show. The movie uses that knowledge and stresses the chaos such circumstances create onstage. Seen today, it’s funnier than it has any right to be, largely because, even half-dead and looking terrible, Barrymore could still chew scenery like a master. Always a small, neatly proportioned man, perfect in size for stage and screen, he looks shrunken, hypothalamic, and ill. He is a ruin, but a magnificent one. As his big blond wife (a former acrobat) walks out on him, he pulls

together whatever dignity he can locate and accepts a glass of water and two aspirin from his Chinese servant. Trying to stop his hand from shaking, he intones magnificently, thoughtfully, "In many ways, she was the best of them all." Barrymore might be shredding himself for money, but he accepts defeat with a glory worthy of Robert E. Lee.

What looked smart on-screen, however, was often not so funny in real life. To a ludicrous extreme, studios began to believe in their own creations and even get confused about them. Lucille Ball claimed she once tried to get a role in which the script described the character as a "Lucille Ball type." The producer turned her down, saying she wasn't right for the part. A publicity flack once explained to an interviewer that when people went to *Gone with the Wind*, "they went to see Clark Gable, not Rhett Butler, because Rhett Butler was really Clark Gable." When Greer Garson married the co-star who had played her son in *Mrs. Miniver* (Richard Ney), Louis B. Mayer freaked out. "What will people think?" he is supposed to have bellowed at her. "You've married your own son!" When she reminded him that Ney was *not* her son* and that they were eager to wed because Ney was going to war, Mayer allegedly perked up and said, "Well, maybe he'll be killed and our problem will be solved." (It didn't actually turn out to be that much of a problem. The public accepted the marriage, assuming that if their own dignified British heroine did it, it must be okay.)

Ironically, stars were often very clear regarding their selves and their "selves." Henry Fonda, when asked to play "himself" in Billy Wilder's *Fedora* (1978), said, "How do I do that? I don't know that character."* As reported by Charlotte Chandler in her book on Wilder, Fonda added, "He wanted me to play Henry Fonda! I ain't really Henry Fonda...nobody could have that much integrity." Fonda, of course, knew how to play Henry Fonda. He'd been doing it for years, but always under the cover provided by his character's name. He refused to step out from under that cover and mix up "Henry Fonda" with Henry Fonda. The final word on the understanding of the self, the role, and the type was uttered by Cary

Grant in his famous statement “Everyone wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant.”†

Once established, a star’s image never seemed to go away. An image could crash in flames—the fifty-year-old Errol Flynn looking seventy, a joke of his former self, playing his established type in *Cuban Rebel Girls* (1959). And it could be spoofed—Victor Mature, a flamboyant former star, portrays a flamboyant former star in Vittorio de Sica’s comedy *After the Fox* (1966). Image/type could be seriously questioned and reformed, as by Clint Eastwood in *Unforgiven* (1992), or cheerfully played with, as when Sean Connery played Indiana Jones’s father, or when James Garner, the original Maverick on TV, played the movie Maverick’s (Mel Gibson’s) father. It can even be trotted out on waxworks display, as with Mae West in *Myra Breckinridge* (1970).

Typecasting was not considered a negative or even limiting thing by the business that was doing everything it could to make it happen. For the studios, it guaranteed factory efficiency. It meant a star’s character was in place and movies called “vehicles” could be quickly assembled, made, and released by the factory. The star machine—from discovery through buildup to successful typecasting—worked like a charm. Usually.

The machine, however, was only a machine. It *could* locate, shape, cut, paste, and sell an actor as a star with great success. It *could* respond to the public’s own discoveries—“Who’s that guy in the tuxedo, let me see more of him, please”—with great alacrity. It *could* change direction and drop someone who wasn’t working out or rush to elevate someone who suddenly seemed right for the changing times. It could do a lot of things. Sometimes it worked perfectly, but other times it malfunctioned. A star would not be made.

* Today we use the word casually, and claim it for an actor who has played a role—even one role—so strongly that we are impressed. The term is cheapened. As critic Stephanie Zacharek observes, “Sometimes it’s easier to grapple with what characters mean than with what they [stars] do: James Dean stands for youthful rebellion; Natalie Wood for the adolescent’s seemingly disparate appetites for wildness and tenderness, etc.” Film

historians also see another problem with the labeling in that those who use it have often seen only a small number of the actor's movies, the most popular and regularly revived ones. Thus, they are providing "definitions" of persona that do not address changes, growths, variations, and violations of the concept. In that regard, these star definitions are often more about the definer than they are about the star. (What you see is who you are.) It is increasingly noted in academic star studies that the way we see and define stars today is often not how they were perceived in their own era.

† This is one step away from something modern thinkers know would be silly—believing "that guy" is who Gable really was offscreen.

* For forty years, on land and on sea, in youth and old age, John Wayne did it. He was the all-time box office champion, with twenty-five years on top. A remarkable sight captured on television occurred when Wayne, seriously ill with cancer, came to the Oscar ceremony to present the 1978 Best Picture award in spring of 1979. His peers in the audience knew he was dying. The entire audience leapt to its feet to give him a heartfelt standing ovation—not the obligatory "Here's an old star, let's stand up and applaud" routine we sometimes see. As affection poured forth, a cut to the audience revealed Sir Laurence Olivier getting to his feet, clapping slowly, with a thoughtful look on his face. It was the look of an actor who was perhaps realizing that there are different types of performing, and that while Wayne's was not his, it *was* valid.

* Muni's co-stars always complained about him. Cornel Wilde played Chopin in *A Song to Remember* (1945), and Muni portrayed his old teacher. Wilde described Muni as "insecure, confused, constantly upset, jealous." He described Muni's working habits: "He never looked me in the eyes...he would look between my brows or at my forehead...he played...very high and full of all kinds of tricks...blowing his nose, taking out his glasses and breathing on them, constantly moving."

* This arrival at the top, or the brink of typing, was a dangerous moment for the "product." Fred Astaire explained it to the young Jack Lemmon: "You're now at a level where you can afford only one mistake. The higher up you go, the more mistakes you're allowed. Right at the top, if you make enough of them, it's considered to be your style." In other words, once you were successfully typed, you were safe.

* Bogart had begun to play leading roles in such films as *High Sierra* (1941), but still as a gangster. Following the pattern of the "three roles to glory," he became the world-weary cynical romantic with *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), where the public really endorsed him as a

lead; confirmed his stardom in *Across the Pacific* in 1942; and rose forever to his “persona” in *Casablanca* (1943).

* The studio files defined Eleanor Powell’s talent category as “tap dancer” and her type as “all-American girl.”

* Sheridan was given this publicity tag in March 1939, shortly before she was featured on the cover of *Life* in July. “Oomph” was defined as “to a girl what a pearl is to an oyster” and “a feminine desirability which can be observed with pleasure but cannot be discussed with respectability.”

† Ironically, Morgan was actually of Swedish descent. His “Irish” association always amused him.

* This is the movie that contains the immortal line “Amnesia. That’s an alibi, not an ailment.” There are some other wonderful lines, superbly tossed off by Patrick and Ross. The latter, hearing that her groom has just run off with another woman and what’s more, his car went over a cliff and all that’s left is his overcoat, a hat with his initials in it, and a woman’s pink hat with a feather, pulls herself up straight and informs the cops grandly, “My husband never wore pink.” When they were promoting a potential above-the-title star, Warners could be cheap in reusing sets and furniture, but they didn’t forget to make the movie fun for Morgan’s audience.

* They also both appeared in cameos in a ninth film—playing themselves—*The Youngest Profession*.

* She was in contrast to the sexy pinups of the era, like Rita Hayworth and Betty Grable, or the exotics like Veronica Lake and Lauren Bacall. Girls like Lane—and Donna Reed and Jeanne Crain and Joan Leslie—really existed. We had them in my hometown: exceptionally pretty, with all the bloom of youth and innocence on them. Study any high school yearbook from 1939 to 1945 and you’ll see these faces. To pick out a few, put them up on-screen, and mark them “the girl next door” was smart business.

* Marlon Brando, on the other hand, either didn’t get it or refused to get it. “I continue to be an enigma to myself,” was his take on his type. Since the advertising trailer for *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) carried a voice-over saying his character is “Fighting! Loving! Lusting!”, it’s no wonder he was confused. Perhaps the toughest self-assessment of them all came from John Lund, who was briefly a heartthrob in the 1940s: “I look best from a great distance and in a bad light. I have a peculiar face, an odd walk, and about as much sex appeal as a goat. I was the worst peril Betty Hutton encountered in *The Perils of Pauline* (1947). I portrayed a ham actor. A natural. My finest performance.”

* Although Gable bombed badly in *Parnell*, he went right on to success in *Saratoga* (1937) and *Test Pilot* (1938). The studio restored his macho image, and all was forgiven. This same thing can happen today. When Harrison Ford was cast as a rigid, by-the-book Russian submarine captain in *K-19: The Widowmaker* (2002), he was denying his fundamental American, mock-the-authorities maverick character. Audiences didn't forgive him as quickly as they did Gable.

† To be fair, Gable had very few flops because he stuck closely to his image as "Gable." He knew his type—and every studio wanted one. The movie world of the 1930s was heavily populated with shortish, mustachioed men running around wearing their pants under their armpits, trying to be Gable. The type continued in Tom Selleck. He had the grin, the mustache, and the moves. In the 1980s, Selleck was the man women wanted to have and the man men wanted to be. His Magnum character was an updated Gable role.

* This quality of Milland's was used brilliantly by Alfred Hitchcock, who cast him as the murderer who coldbloodedly plans his wife's demise in *Dial M for Murder* (1954).

† Milland followed *The Lost Weekend* with a return to "type" in *The Well-Groomed Bride* (1946), with Olivia de Havilland. Milland later said, "Right after *Lost Weekend*, I made three of the worst pictures, one right after another, because they shove you into everything they can after a hit."

‡ In his day, the six-foot-three Payne was considered a close rival to Tyrone Power as a hunk. Although his looks were not as lush as Power's—Payne was clean-cut, not exotic—he was exceptionally good-looking and well-built. In one of his early films, *Kid Nightingale*, a character says of him, "Dames go for him. He's got looks, personality—and rosy cheeks." It was a line right out of his publicity kit. Payne, billed as John Howard Payne, made his movie debut in 1936's *Dodsworth*.

* This type of star definition still goes on today, only it's done by fancy journals with loftier goals. *Gentlemen's Quarterly* of March 2005 put Russell Crowe on its cover and announced that "The Ten Greatest Actors of Our Generation" could be found inside. Each had his "persona" defined. Crowe was given what would have been a standard 1940s spin job. "If the world pegs you as boorish, cocky, and self-righteous, perhaps that's just the price for keeping up your standards in a world where fewer and fewer people seem to care about doing good work." The writer (Chris Heath) gushingly tells readers that "beneath [Crowe's] tabloid tough-guy exterior beats a punk-rock heart." He's really a nice guy after all. (This was, of course, before he threw a telephone in the face of a hotel concierge in June 2005 and was charged with second-degree assault.) Crowe, Heath tells us, passed him a meat pie

and showed him “how to slather tomato sauce over its crust,” a useful skill to be sure, and an obvious act of great generosity.

The other nine “greats” are Nicolas Cage (“a jazz actor whose bizarre choices...are almost always the best thing in the movie”); Clive Owen (“steely, charming”); Benicio Del Toro (“has never pimped himself out to the romantic comedy”); John C. Reilly (“the gut-level sympathy Reilly quietly musters for his sidekicks...”); Don Cheadle (“a tenderness and vulnerability we never expected”); Gael García Bernal (“a mix of terror and tenderness that feels both brave and utterly genuine”); Leonardo DiCaprio (“swaggering and fragile”); Jim Carrey (“uncanny timing, pitch-perfect delivery, and full-body commitment...our greatest clown of both the exuberant and sad varieties”); and Johnny Depp (“In Johnny’s hands, it all makes sense”).

† Carson and Morgan were paired at Warner Bros. as rivals for the successful pairings of Bob Hope and Bing Crosby at Paramount in the *Road* pictures. Carson and Morgan did *Two Guys from Texas* (1948) and *Two Guys from Milwaukee* (1946).

* A similar thing was done on the TV show *Friends* with Jennifer Aniston. They had her real-life husband at the time appear as a guest on the show, playing an old high school friend of the gang who is invited over by someone who doesn’t realize that he used to hate Aniston’s character. Which would have been totally pointless if everybody hadn’t known it was Brad Pitt, Aniston’s then husband. His presence turns the episode into an international in-joke. It is essentially an appearance as himself, although everyone kept a straight face and officially pretended he was in character.

* She was nearly twelve years his senior.

* Fonda refused the role, and it was Michael York who ended up playing “himself.”

† In the 1980s, decades after she had won the Oscar for portraying a nun in *The Song of Bernadette* in 1943, Jennifer Jones complained, “People who remember Bernadette expect me to be wan and spiritual. Not only on the screen, but in my private life.” The ultimate in such quotes was the sweetly sad observation once made by the disillusioned Rita Hayworth: “Every man I knew fell in love with Gilda and woke up with me.”

MALFUNCTIONS



Anna Sten, film history's definition of the term *malfunction*.

Any business that manufactures a product and puts it on the market accepts the one unpredictable factor: Will anyone buy it? (In the auto business, it would be called “the Edsel issue.”) The movie factory moguls knew that inevitably, some of the actors they groomed would not become stars. As Louis B. Mayer once said, “Business is not an exact science.” They were as prepared for product malfunction as any business could be. They controlled the objective part of their own process—the star machine—and did the best they could to cope with the subjective part outside their total control, the part that happened after the audience became fully involved.

“Product malfunction” was a rule of the game. Because the studios had so much product in development, they could be

sanguine about the end result. Were they happy if they invested in a star who never made it? Of course not. Did they waste much time trying to figure it out? No. Why should they? Each and every property was given enough of a chance—or so the studios believed—to have made it. If the machine somehow malfunctioned in the washing, nipping, tucking, and creating process, everyone simply turned toward the next prospect. The “whys” were absorbed and perhaps speculated on a bit, but one thing about the movie business was (and is) true: Nothing there ever lasted, so optimism was the order of the day. They concentrated only on success and didn’t waste much time trying to explain or analyze failure.

Looking back, however, one finds the star machine malfunctions morbidly fascinating. Sometimes a star who doesn’t make it is gloriously beautiful (Sigrid Gurie) or truly talented (Karen Morley) or has a special skill (singers Miliza Korjus of *The Great Waltz* [1938] and Douglas McPhail of *Babes in Arms* [1939]). It doesn’t always make sense that one star makes it and another doesn’t, or that the public would select one actor and not another. The famous dancer Paul Draper appeared in a supporting role in the 1936 Ruby Keeler–Dick Powell musical, *Colleen*. Draper was extremely handsome, much better looking in the conventional sense than Fred Astaire, and he certainly could dance. But Draper had no personality on film. He was dropped into the star machine—and it spat him back out. Sometimes a big-name influence (Howard Hughes, for instance) put everything he had into developing a star (the lackluster Faith Domergue) and still couldn’t make it happen.

“Malfunction” doesn’t mean miscasting or casting against established type. Miscasting could happen to anyone. It wasn’t only Clark Gable in *Parnell*. Try Spencer Tracy as a Portuguese fisherman in *Captains Courageous* (1937), and he even won an Oscar for the effort! And “malfunction” doesn’t mean big stars having the failure of movies blamed on them. Joan Crawford had *Rain* (1932), Frank Sinatra had *The Kissing Bandit* (1948), and in later years, Warren Beatty and Dustin Hoffman had *Ishtar* (1987).^{*} Malfunction can never mean a case in which genuine tragedy removes an up-and-coming star from the ladder of success. In this category was the

wonderfully charming and easygoing comedy star Robert Williams, a Bing Crosby type who played the lead in Frank Capra's *Platinum Blonde* in 1931. Williams died of a burst appendix before the film was released, but he had everything it took to be a star. Richard Hart, a more dubious case, was developed at MGM as the very highest level of investment in the late 1940s. Hart looked somewhat like a younger version of Walter Pidgeon, especially in profile or when he was wearing a mustache. He made only four movies, but each was a key role: *Desire Me* (1947), with Robert Mitchum and Greer Garson; *Green Dolphin Street* (1947), with Lana Turner and Donna Reed; *B.F.'s Daughter* (1948), with Barbara Stanwyck; and Anthony Mann's delightful *Reign of Terror* (1949), with Robert Cummings and Arlene Dahl. Hart died tragically of a heart attack at the age of thirty-five, cutting short a star machine development process that showed that MGM had the utmost confidence in him. Actresses with tragedies that blocked stardom include the beautiful Frances Gifford, who disappeared in 1953, spending two decades in a mental institution for acute depression, and Susan Peters, who was paralyzed from the waist down when she was accidentally shot during a hunting trip.

Malfunction is also not about someone who was successful in his own time who does *not* come across today,* such as Robert Montgomery, one of the most successful and intelligent of the MGM male stars of the 1930s. (He left the movies to serve his country during World War II as commander of a PT boat. After the war, he became a TV director and producer and served in the Eisenhower administration.) Montgomery provided the perfect male balance to female stars such as Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, Rosalind Russell, and others. He was very handsome in the drawing-room-manners mode. Loaded with charm, he knew his way around smart, sassy dialogue. Today, however, audiences find him cold. There is about him a distinct edge of disdain. His projection of smug superiority, meant to be amusing, climbs down off the screen and irritates a modern audience. He's slumming. This quality was right for his times, but now he denies the audience entrance.†

“Malfunction” means *malfunction*. It means the failure of the machine to sell an actor or actress that the studio had worked hard to turn into a movie star. It means the public just wouldn’t buy. Perhaps the single most famous example of the malfunction process is the case of Anna Sten, a beautiful European woman brought to Hollywood by Samuel Goldwyn to become a rival to Greta Garbo. No one ever thinks to ask *why* Greta Garbo became a star. When we see her on-screen, she’s mysterious and alluring, and no explanation seems necessary. On the other hand, why *did* she make it? She’s taller than almost all of her leading men. She refused to do publicity or cooperate with the star-making folderol. She couldn’t be cast as the little schoolmarm, and let’s not forget all those rumors about her big feet. (Actually, her feet were not big. They were right for her shape and her size and they look very good in high-heeled boots, ballet shoes, or exotic sandals.) But Garbo was unique and transcended all those issues. See one of her movies, silent or sound, and the explanation of her stardom is right in front of you. She is the very essence of the concept. No matter what nonsense is taking place around her—plagues in Asia, spies in Old Europe, double standards in ritzy households—Garbo shines. She’s awesome, unique, unusual, talented—whatever. She’s a movie star yardstick. And Anna Sten? She doesn’t measure up to Garbo.

What was Anna Sten’s problem? She was a stunning blonde who arrived in America in 1933 surrounded by great hoopla. She made her Hollywood film debut in 1934 in an adaptation of Émile Zola’s novel *Nana* and was an immediate flop. Her follow-up movie, *The Wedding Night* (1935), paired her with Gary Cooper and was also deemed a failure. Sten soon gave up and went home. When we look at her movies today, it’s apparent that there’s nothing wrong with her. She’s exceptionally beautiful, and she’s talented. Her performances are sensitive and touching. Goldwyn was smart to select her for stardom, but not smart in promoting her as “the next Garbo.” He found out the public wanted the Garbo they had, not some fake one. Or, if they had to accept some other exotic European, they’d take Marlene Dietrich. Since fans didn’t want Sten to be their Garbo, could she have been their Sten, if handled

differently? It's possible. All around her, lesser talents and lesser beauties were being successfully turned into movie stars. It was trying to turn Sten into *Garbo* that was the problem.

Malfunction was sometimes about such issues—selling a star by measuring her against an established rival—but mostly malfunction just means never becoming a star when everyone in the business thought you would. It means Anna Sten. It means Vera Zorina. Zorina, the famous Balanchine protégée, was also touted for stardom by Goldwyn. Seeing her on film is a dismal experience. She's not that great a dancer, and although people who knew her always spoke of her great beauty, the camera refuses to validate it. She looks flat-faced. She can't act. She has no physical presence, no spark of warmth. She's a movie ice maiden but without the shellacked icy chill that can come off a hot property like Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), all in white as she lures John Garfield to help kill her husband, or Rita Hayworth, red locks shorn and hair dyed white blond in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948). The stone-cold look made these two more erotic—they're cold, and that's hot! On Zorina, it's just cold.*



Vera Zorina, the famous Balanchine ballerina the camera revealed to have no on-screen magic.

Malfunction is a mystery best solved in retrospect, and a good way to understand it is to compare a successful star to a failed one. For instance, why does Bing Crosby become a top movie star for decades and Perry Como doesn't? Como is better looking than Crosby, and he, too, can sing beautifully. Like Crosby, Como was said to be laid-back, a relaxed guy you'd like to have around. But seen on a movie screen, trying to act out a role, Como is stiff and bland and offers no connection to the viewer. He's not movie star material. Como *did* become a star on television, an entirely different medium, but as himself, not in performed roles. (In fact, TV is a medium that can't absorb too much pizzazz in its actors. The screen is small. That's why its heroes have been minimalists like Clint Eastwood, James Garner, and Tom Selleck.) Como being himself on television, the "living room medium," is just fine. He's suitable in a medium that's part of a room's furniture, because he himself is like a piece of furniture. Crosby, who is, of course, the greater singer and more original stylist, has something else that Como lacks: a mysterious edge. Crosby sails along through whatever material he has to deal with, giving it a light touch that robs it of its overly sentimental quality and shoring up its lack of depth. He easily tosses off amusing asides as if they're ad libs, and these remarks often have a tinge of cruelty to them. There's meanness in Crosby, and audiences liked him for it. There are demons floating behind his cow eyes. Moviegoers didn't care if he was a bad drunk, an unsympathetic father, a meandering husband—they were with him all the way. Como is nice, but on film that's all he seems to be. He's *too* nice. It's not enough.

Crosby's brand of warmth—friendly, casual despite that underlying edge—came across in anything: movies, radio, recordings, and television. In addition to his obvious musical talent, Crosby could act. (He was ranked among the top ten movie stars for fourteen years, number one from 1944 through 1948.) He could be

cast comfortably with a variety of leading ladies, from Ingrid Bergman to Betty Hutton. In his career, he was a successful co-star for Mary Martin, Dorothy Lamour, Bergman, Joan Caulfield, Jane Wyman, Marion Davies, Joan Fontaine, Grace Kelly, Debbie Reynolds, Ann-Margret, Rhonda Fleming. Beautiful or not beautiful. Talented or not talented. Musical or dramatic. Whether he played opposite nuns, frowsy housewives, WAVEs, or movie stars, he paired easily and effectively with whomever he was assigned—a major asset in the studio system. Just as important, Crosby was easily adaptable to another leading *man*. His confidence inside the frame allowed him to adjust his attitude and manner to any male co-star without fear of being upstaged.* Everyone knows his amazingly successful partnership with Bob Hope, but Crosby was equally at ease with Sinatra in *High Society* (1956) as well as *Robin and the Seven Hoods* (1964), with Fred Astaire in *Blue Skies* (1946), with Danny Kaye in *White Christmas* (1954), with Donald O'Connor in *Anything Goes* (1956), as well as with that frightening old ham Barry Fitzgerald in *Going My Way* (1944). With Sinatra, Crosby was the consummate pro, on his toes but delighted to be alongside the other great male singer of his era. With Hope, he was all ad libs and banter, and with Kaye, a perfect foil for zaniness. With O'Connor he was paternal, having first starred with him when O'Connor was a kid, in *Sing You Sinners* (1938). In Astaire he found another master of self-confident charm, and the two of them show a mutual respect and a sense of joy as they swing out tapping together in *Blue Skies*, in the “A Couple of Song and Dance Men” number. Finally, confronted with the over-the-top Irishness and twinkle of the mugging Fitzgerald, Crosby nonchalantly lets Fitzgerald get on with it, watching with a touch of detached amusement that nevertheless borders on the judgmental. Crosby keeps Fitzgerald in place every step of the way.

Crosby is what you can call a real movie star—so much so that he's often not even thought of as one. He's loose with it. David Thomson says Crosby “has a good case as the most popular American to appear in movies.” Crosby is the quintessential American man, our most comfortable vision of ourselves. (Jimmy

Stewart is too neurotic in some of his roles for an *ideal* version of ourselves—he gets mad a lot.) Crosby is not the tallest, not the handsomest, not the sexiest or the biggest dreamboat, but he *is* calm, tolerant, funny, romantic, capable, honest—and he’s got that meanness, plus a touch of larceny and the ability to con anyone out of anything. *That’s an American.*

The female version of the Crosby-Como comparison is the case of Doris Day and Rosemary Clooney, two blond singers who were signed by Hollywood and marked as potential stars. Day made her first movie, *Romance on the High Seas*, in 1948, and Clooney’s was *The Stars Are Singing* in 1953. Neither needed a long “buildup” process because she had already hit the top as a band singer. Day’s rendition of “Sentimental Journey” with Les Brown’s band was a standard, and Clooney, who had once sung with Tony Pastor, had the number-one song of 1952, “Come On-a My House.” She had become a household name.

Warners, always cheap, decided to save themselves the time, money, and trouble needed to “groom” Day. They just presented her the way she was: a little bit bucktoothed, a little bit gangling, a little bit naïve and unsophisticated, but with a very big singing talent and a very likable personality. Although Day’s debut was in the trivial (but fun) *Romance*, she was given two great songs in it: “It’s Magic” and “Put ’Em in a Box,” both of which became hits for her. Warners wasn’t famous for developing singing stars, but they handled her perfectly. Day, who went on to become one of the all-time box office female stars as well as a major television and recording star, seemed as comfortable as an old shoe—America immediately fell in love with her. Michael Curtiz allegedly told her, “Whatever you do, don’t ever take acting lessons. Just stay the way you are.”

Clooney arrived in Hollywood with high hopes and a strong sense that she was movie star material. She was—and remained to her death—a fantastic singer. She had been signed by Paramount Pictures, even though she was under contract to Columbia Records.* At the time, she was pretty and slender, and had all the required warmth. She seemed real, and had an easy, natural style. Right away, however, Paramount started “assessing” her negatively. Her

nose was maybe too wide. Her face was maybe too long, or even a bit horsey. Her jaw seemed too prominent and she was a little hippy. Clooney balked at changes, and instead of showcasing her as she was and letting it rip, as Warners did with the toothy and long-waisted Doris Day, Paramount hedged and put Clooney into the weak *Stars Are Singing*. Her role was almost a supporting part even though she was billed above the title. Her songs didn't become hits. (No one remembers "I Do, I Do" or "Haven't Got a Worry to My Name" today.)



Two blond singers—one who became a star ([*above*] Doris Day in her first movie, *Romance on the High Seas*)—and one who did not (Rosemary Clooney [*below*] on the set and in costume for her film debut, *The Stars Are Singing*).



Paramount *did* make some effort to promote Clooney, and she received nice reviews for the movie. Waiting for her next film, she went on recording and performing in nightclubs, and she started dating a married actor, José Ferrer. This got her in trouble with the Paramount bosses. Even though she was on the cover of *Time* magazine in February 1953, she made only three more movies: *Here Come the Girls* (1953), with Bob Hope; *Red Garters* (1954), a musical western; and the movie by which she is best remembered, *White Christmas* (1954), a semi-remake of *Holiday Inn* (1942), with Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye, and Vera-Ellen. Except for a guest appearance singing and dancing in a number called “Mr. and Mrs.” in *Deep in My Heart* (1954),* that was it for the movies and Rosemary Clooney.

By virtue of talent and opportunity, Rosemary Clooney should have become a big movie star. Her movie failure is inexplicable. Paramount was excited by her work in *White Christmas* and announced that more pictures were being planned for her. But nothing happened. In the end she made only four movies, all between 1952 and 1955, although she went on to television, more recordings, and five children after she married Ferrer. She became a legendary singer, but for some reason the public didn’t fall in love with her, probably because Clooney holds herself back. She’ll give a song all she’s got, but she won’t share herself. When an audience

looks at her, Clooney doesn't generate the prerequisite sense that we know what she's thinking and feeling. She gives out nothing, except, of course, when she sings, but her singing is better experienced by listening to recordings or attending her performances. Day generated involvement with the audience through her singing—she sang as if her character were talking to the audience through the lyrics. Clooney just sang her song. Paramount also never trusted Clooney with a movie, the way Warner Bros. did Doris Day. The studio treated Clooney as if she would fail if she were the only star of a movie. She was *always* accompanied by Bob Hope or Bing Crosby or overshadowed by generic satire and stylized sets as in *Red Garters*. Perhaps Paramount had it right—she wasn't going to be a movie star, and she needed help. Or perhaps she didn't become a movie star because Paramount wouldn't give her the chance. No one can know for sure, but Rosemary Clooney is a clear case of stardom malfunction.

Since so many musicals were made during the studio years, singers were in great demand for movies, and many of them were malfunction cases. Any good-looking musical guy or gal got a tryout, and many turned out to be excellent actors (Crosby, Sinatra, Day, Peggy Lee, Garland, and others). However, one of the best, Dinah Shore, despite loads of charm, never made it. (Her folksy manner was perfect for television, where she became one of the medium's great figures.) In the 1940s and 1950s, good-looking male singers, such as Dick Haymes, Johnnie Johnston, and Gordon MacRae, had brief, sputtering careers. Pat Boone, who was a teen idol when the term really meant something, had some film success. His studio, 20th Century-Fox, tried to shape him into a major movie star, and as the leading man in *April Love* (1957), he was solid. But his movie career never really took off, partly because his style was eclipsed by a certain Paramount Pictures singer/star, who was already gyrating his career forward—Elvis Presley.

Another great singer, Ruth Etting, whose life story was made into the Doris Day-James Cagney movie, *Love Me or Leave Me* (1955), also couldn't be made into a movie star. She originally established herself on radio as America's favorite torch singer. (It's a

toss-up as to whether Etting or Kate Smith was the greatest singing star of the radio era.) Florenz Ziegfeld used Etting in his *Follies*, and she played opposite Eddie Cantor on Broadway in *Whoopee* and Ed Wynn in *Simple Simon*. Ziegfeld said she was the greatest singer he had managed in all his years, quite an accolade from the man who had also promoted Fanny Brice. In 1928, Etting started making musical shorts for Paramount-Astoria, the first called simply *Ruth Etting*. She then moved to Vitaphone, where she became the queen of musical short subjects, making about thirteen Vitaphone Varieties and Broadway Brevities between 1931 and 1933, and about fourteen shorts for RKO from 1933 until 1936. In 1933 Samuel Goldwyn (again!) decided to capitalize on her success in shorts by putting her into a full-length feature, *Roman Scandals*, but problems resulted. Etting had never been really trained as an actress and wasn't good at delivering lines. She was no longer a young girl, and although pretty, had never really been a beauty. In a short subject, and for ten minutes, she could be a movie star. If all she was going to do was swing out one of her trademark Depression hits, such as "Ten Cents a Dance" (in 1930's *Roseland* for Vitaphone) or "If I Could Be with You One Hour Tonight" (*One Good Turn*, 1930) or "Don't Blame Me" (*A Torch Tango*, 1934), everything would be fine. But when she was cast in a full-length feature, audiences expected more than a great song from her, and she didn't have more to give. Etting had to settle for being the Queen of the Musical Short.

Ginny Simms, a name that means nothing to anyone under the age of sixty, was a good band singer with beautiful skin, a sparkling smile, and a terrific figure. (If Ethel Merman had been a beauty, she would have been Ginny Simms.) She was truly glamorous, but she never made the grade in movies. Why? Not being able to act surely had never kept anyone from stardom. But in her appearances in such films as the 1940 Kay Kyser vehicle *You'll Find Out*, Simms seemed to be just standing around, waiting for her number. She was given every possible chance at stardom. When she became the "protégée" of Louis B. Mayer, he pulled out all the stops to showcase her in the Technicolor musical *Broadway Rhythm* (1944). She has a closetful of costume changes, each outfit more spectacular than the

last, and she's beautifully made up, lit, and photographed. It's said that Simms was happy with Mayer's sponsorship to a point but had no interest in marrying him. The failure of her career is often blamed on his subsequently dumping her, but Ginny Simms would not have been a star no matter how much of Mayer's chicken soup she might have accepted. Opposite Cary Grant in a secondary role in *Night and Day* (1946), she appears "on-stage" in a bright aqua fur-trimmed coat, an astonishing hat, and the obligatory chunky high heels of the era, and she really delivers on "Just One of Those Things." But in the rest of the movie, whenever she enters and no matter what she says, she still seems to be waiting to twirl onstage and start singing. ("Is it my turn yet?") Ginny Simms is always Ginny Simms, a singer who arrives in the frame *only* to do a musical number. The radiant young Simms seems to be the epitome of stardom, but that's the problem. She looks like a patented trademark product. She's practically embalmed. She poses and makes no real connection to anyone else in the frame—or in the audience.

In the 1947 hit musical *Good News*, a talented young singer-dancer, Joan McCracken, was given the showcase role of Babe, a comedy sidekick. McCracken was a successful Broadway star who later became a major influence on (and girlfriend of) choreographer Bob Fosse. She had found lasting fame as the original "girl who fell down" in the opening "Many a New Day" number in Agnes de Mille's choreography for *Oklahoma!** McCracken had come to Hollywood in 1944 and was put under contract to Warner Bros. (the standard seven-year deal), but they really didn't know what to do with her. She had only appeared in an extended dance number in the patriotic *Hollywood Canteen* (1944). Called "Ballet in Jive," it was choreographed by LeRoy Prinz, and used the "girl who fell down" country girl concept that had brought McCracken to fame on Broadway. After being considered for other roles (such as in *Meet Me in St. Louis*) and returning to Broadway for *Bloomer Girl*, McCracken was finally assigned her showcase "supporting" role in MGM's *Good News* (1947). She does the film's big opening number ("Tate College") and later brings down the house with her rousing "Pass That Peace Pipe" song and dance in the campus malt shop.

Within a few years, another young girl named Debbie Reynolds was given a similar opportunity in a musical called *Two Weeks with Love* (1950). She also had two numbers: “Row, Row, Row” and what is now a famous musical moment, the “Abba Dabba Honeymoon” number with Carleton Carpenter. Like McCracken, Reynolds was playing the comedy sidekick. Also like McCracken, Reynolds was short, very physical, very exuberant, and presented as a boy chaser who delivered tart, zingy lines. Reynolds was a huge hit and became a star who is still a big name today. McCracken went back to New York to stay. Why Debbie Reynolds and not Joan McCracken?

McCracken, undoubtedly a big talent, was a Broadway pro, and it shows. She knocks out her music and her lines with that hard edge that’s reaching for the little old lady in the balcony. However, she has no up-close appeal, an absolute must for movie stardom. And she’s faux-fresh. Reynolds was fresh, a naïve kid from Burbank with no professional experience. When Reynolds came on the screen, she had an innocence that would still be with her when she made show business history a couple of years later in *Singin’ in the Rain*. But more important, when the camera came up close, she could play to it, be intimate with her audience. Reynolds had the three-dimensional spirit. McCracken played horizontally across the frame to an audience that wasn’t there. Reynolds played right to the camera, the only audience she’d ever known.

Success on Broadway never ensured a movie career. The movie frame and the proscenium arch are two distinctly different acting spaces. Although some people can fill both with ease, adapting as needed, the majority cannot. Two of Broadway’s biggest names, Ethel Merman and Mary Martin, could never get their film careers going despite a logical assumption that they should be big at the box office. Martin had talent *and* looks, although she wasn’t truly beautiful, and Merman had talent. Martin wasn’t big enough to fill the screen and Merman was *too* big. (Had she not been such a star name, she might have become a secondary lead, a musical Eve Arden.) Both Merman and Martin were given solid chances in the movies, with Merman having the greater success of the two. She found one of her most simpatico roles when she reprised one of her

greatest stage hits, *Call Me Madam* (1953), re-creating her pseudo-Perle Mesta character and belting out “The Hostess with the Mostest on the Ball.” Perhaps audiences didn’t need Merman on film, since movie sound systems could deliver her kind of famous belting reach from any performer. Without the thrill of Merman’s voice raising hackles in a live performance, she was reduced to less than she was. At least she was reduced to nothing special other than that famous Broadway person, Ethel Merman, playing in a movie. Merman was great, but film was not her medium.

If all we knew about Mary Martin were her lackluster screen appearances, no one would ever understand why she became a great star.* She looks like a lesser Jean Arthur, without Arthur’s unique speaking voice and delicious warmth. Martin was given the best of it in setting up her potential movie career. Her movie debut at Paramount was in *The Great Victor Herbert* (1939), with Allan Jones. The movie in which it was thought she would break through was the filmed version of the popular stage hit *Kiss the Boys Goodbye* in 1941. Unfortunately, the movie turned out to be a rather messy version of the Broadway show, in which Martin plays an unknown actress trying aggressively to win the national search for an actress who is “half Vivien Leigh, half Deanna Durbin, half Shirley Temple.” Looking at Martin in *Kiss* today, a viewer can see that she’s cute, she’s peppy, and she certainly can sing, but she’s not as photogenic as she needs to be. Paramount spent 1940, 1941, and 1942 trying to turn her into what everyone logically thought she could be: a popular movie musical comedy star. She was cast with Bing Crosby (*Rhythm on the River*), Jack Benny and Fred Allen (*Love Thy Neighbor*), and Dick Powell, Eddie Bracken, and an emerging Betty Hutton in *Happy Go Lucky* (early 1943 release). Nothing really worked. The public didn’t buy.

It wasn’t just singers who experienced these mysterious movie malfunctions, of course. Warner Bros. wanted a Cary Grant, so they signed Robert Alda,* a Cary Grant look-alike. Warner Bros. worked hard to develop Alda as a star, even though some of their plans for him were dubious. (In *The Man I Love* [1946], he co-stars with Ida Lupino, but when the big crisis arrives, it’s Lupino who steps up and

socks the villain, not Alda.) In some ways, Alda is more conventionally handsome than Grant, more polished, more honestly debonair. Grant's elegance always contained that touch of the other—an authentic sense of a guy who hadn't always been so debonair but had *learned* how to be, which is why audiences loved him. Alda was a Broadway success and an excellent actor, but he lacked the strange nooks and crannies of ambivalent meaning that made Grant a star. (James Wolcott described Grant as being “cubism in a business suit.”) Alda was too perfect. No slightly querulous voice, no weird hairline, no touch of Cockney in his accent, and no sense that underneath the calm exterior, things were boiling. Grant was smooth, but his pants might fall down. Oh, he'd cope, and still look good, but he had an “anything might happen” excitement that Alda could never convey.

Interestingly, Alda and Grant both starred for Warners in biopics about musical geniuses. In 1945, Alda appeared as George Gershwin in *Rhapsody in Blue*, and in 1946, Grant played Cole Porter in *Night and Day*—two look-alike actors playing fake versions of the lives of two men whose “action”—composing music—takes place in their heads. *Rhapsody* chooses to tell the full Gershwin story, starting in his childhood on Manhattan's colorful Lower East Side and moving forward through his struggle for fame. (Warners was recycling material they had used in other movies such as *City for Conquest* [1940] and *Blues in the Night* [1941].) On the other hand, they chose to begin Porter's story when he's an already grown-up Yale. Since Porter was homosexual, Warners felt his story had to be treated delicately, and they treated it so delicately that nothing happens. The sinking of the *Lusitania* throws Porter temporarily off course, and he's vaguely wounded in World War I (a figment of the screenwriters' imaginations). His “war wound” recovery is très glamorous, taking place in an attractive French hospital that has a grand piano so he can compose “Night and Day” in his spare healing time while Alexis Smith sits nobly by, tending him while planning to micromanage his career. (Later, a tree falls on him, crippling him. Then he gets up and walks at Yale.)

Night and Day is a true stink bomb of a movie, despite good musical numbers, but Grant inhabits it confidently, as if he's playing at a very high level in a worthwhile property—but in case he isn't, it's not going to implicate *him*. Alda, in comparison, has the better, more fully developed story, and he gets down into it, wallowing in the plot—unlike *Night and Day*, there actually *is* a plot—but he can't make it work. Grant stands to the side and says, "I'm Cary Grant," and audiences know that's true. Alda says, "I'm George Gershwin," and everyone knows it's not. Robert Alda was a good-looking man with talent, tripped up by being a look-alike to Cary Grant, a comparison that just wouldn't fly.*

There were many leading-man malfunctions. The harsh truth is that, in those days, you could get away with mere talent in the theatre, but in movies you had to *be* somebody. A young man named Gordon Oliver was featured dramatically in the 1937 Boris Karloff movie *West of Shanghai*. Oliver played the romantic lead, and he was a real look-alike for Jimmy Stewart. He was thought to be a surefire bet for stardom, but he's about as forgotten as it gets today. Donald Woods was handsome, tall and slim, and a competent actor, with excellent diction. But there was nothing about him that was special, and the audience was cold to him. (In *Sweet Adeline* [1935], Ned Sparks yells at Woods, "You stand there like a cigar store Indian!") It was a suitable epitaph for his film career.)

Shepperd Strudwick was a supporting actor with solid credentials. He was on the borderline between being really handsome and just okay, but he *was* tall (always an asset in the land of Alan Ladd), and he had a good voice to go with his training. When 20th Century-Fox was losing its leading men to the war in 1942, they decided to change his "effeminate" name and try to make a star out of him. (You can just hear the assessment discussion. "What self-respecting red-blooded American guy is going to be named Shepperd?") When "John Shepperd" played the title character in the weak biopic *The Loves of Edgar Allan Poe* (1942), he made no mark. At a crucial moment in the plot, he has what should have been his star-making scene. He reads aloud from "The Raven," trying to sell his manuscript to a reluctant editor who has gathered a

group of printers together to listen. (Pause a moment to consider if today reading a poem aloud could be the dramatic high point of a film. Perhaps if the poet were running ahead of a rolling fireball...) In this crucial scene for his character, which is also a trial scene for his acting ability, Strudwick—both John and Shepperd—failed.*

And so did Everett Marshall, the lead singer in *I Live for Love* (1935), and John Shelton, Alan Marshall, and the very beautiful young child star Robert Sinclair, who looked like Katharine Hepburn when she was playing a man in *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935). Sinclair hit the top, sharing co-billing with Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney in *Thoroughbreds Don't Cry* (1937). He was sort of a new Freddie Bartholomew, very British and classy, and well able to handle his plum role amid the elite. Whatever happened to him? What he was hired to become became Roddy McDowall. Who knows why? These actors were all Edsels in the star machine.

Another famous “he failed to become a star” was the sensuously handsome Jack Beutel, handpicked by Howard Hughes to play Billy the Kid in the Hughes-produced *The Outlaw* (1943). Beutel had a sort of Clint Eastwood-ish look, although he lacked Eastwood's height, his presence, his sense of self-irony, and his clearly masculine quality. *The Outlaw* was designed to be hot, hot, hot, and Beutel was supposed to capture the public (both male and female) and become the first really big new male star of the 1940s.

Hughes had always been smart about star appeal—he was the man who first fully understood Jean Harlow's charisma. He chose Beutel because the young actor had a brooding sensitivity, a sexy mouth, and an almost feminine quality. Hughes had instinctively picked up on the male androgyny that was going to be popular in the postwar era, which brought forth a new type of leading man: the Montgomery Clifts, the James Deans, the Farley Grangers. He was on the ball in his choice, but there were two flaws in his vision: the slow process of getting *The Outlaw* to the general public, who by the time they saw the movie were already tired of it, and his initial misunderstanding of who really was the hot, hot, hot element of the picture. Beutel's co-star, chosen for the size of her bosom, had been thought by Hughes to be someone who would help put Beutel over.

She was very young and totally inexperienced, but that was an asset—she couldn't very well upstage the equally inexperienced Beutel. The girl's name was Jane Russell, and she turned out to have much more than a big bosom. She shoved Beutel off the screen, and not just by bending over.* Russell emerged as a press favorite with her direct gaze, skeptical attitude, and her real sexuality. She was a tall, rangy woman. If all the tail-finned design forms of the 1950s were molded into their human essence, the result would be Jane Russell. She became a perfect on-screen companion for big men like Robert Mitchum and Robert Ryan, but also both Bob Hope and Roy Rogers—and even Marilyn Monroe. No matter what you put up against her, Jane Russell could hold her own. She was down-to-earth and had a sense of humor about the world and herself, and even turned out to be able to sing. By the time *The Outlaw* was in theatres, it was Jane Russell everyone wanted to see. She was presented on the lobby poster, leaning back on a haystack, chewing on a piece of hay, with the words “Mean, Moody, Magnificent” next to her image. And they didn't mean Jack Beutel.



The one who was supposed to become a star (Jack Beutel) didn't, but the one who wasn't, did (Jane Russell), from *The Outlaw*.



Not everyone had Jane Russell's luck. There were so many, many pretty girls who came to Hollywood. Looking at old movie magazines and studio rosters of young hopefuls, you sense that America was made up of nothing but pretty girls. Each decade a long list of these females attained a certain level of achievement before dropping away or fading from sight. The fact they weren't loaded with talent didn't mean they couldn't learn to act, or that there wasn't someone else who couldn't act who *did* make it. In the 1930s, there were Franciska Gaal, Beverly Roberts, Florence Rice, Jean Muir, Patricia Dane, Ellen Drew, Lynne Carver, Gail Patrick, and June Knight. In the 1940s, a time of transition in which many newcomers were under development, there were Dorothy Patrick, Nancy Coleman, Faye Emerson (who upped her level by marrying Franklin D. Roosevelt's son Elliott in 1944), Barbara Bates, Beatrice Pearson, Julie Bishop, Adele Jergens, Frances Gifford, Wanda Hendrix, Allene Roberts, Marguerite Chapman, Marie McDonald,

Marilyn Maxwell (originally called Marvel Maxwell), and so many others.[†]

By the 1950s, as television brought new stars forward, the old-fashioned promotion methods began to seem hokey. The machine kept on chugging, working hard to promote such women as Elaine Stewart, a gorgeous Ava Gardner-ish beauty; Jody Lawrence, who was Kim Novak's cousin; and the exotic Bella Darvi, a "protégée" of Darryl and Virginia Zanuck. ("Darvi" was an amalgam of DARryl and VIRginia.) But the glamour and magic of the system seemed to have less appeal. This brought on a type of *internal* malfunction that was new—a malaise or disillusionment with the idea of stardom *in advance* of its having happened, which affected those undergoing the process.

For instance, a young woman "under development" in the 1950s was Janice Rule. She was a potential star who started out thinking she wanted to do it—and found out she didn't really want to after all. Rule was unusual looking, talented, and brought more to the table than the "Miss Oatmeal of 1955" type of background. She was an Ohio girl who studied ballet and started dancing in Chicago nightclubs in her teens. She attracted enough attention to be offered an excellent film debut playing with luminaries Joan Crawford and Robert Young in the film version of the successful play *Goodbye, My Fancy*, in 1951. The publicity machine went into full force on Rule, who seemed to embody all the naturalness and wholesomeness that era was looking for in female movie stars. Though she appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine on January 8, 1951, and was labeled as a "rising young actress," she never quite secured the leading role. However, Rule also began acting on Broadway, and landed the role of Madge in the original Broadway cast of William Inge's *Picnic*, playing opposite Paul Newman in his Broadway debut. During the 1950s, she alternated film and stage roles, still never finding the singular kind of movie stardom she seemed a natural for. During the 1960s, Rule became interested in psychoanalysis, and after serious study, received her PhD in 1983 from the Southern California Psychoanalytic Institute. Although she did continue to act

occasionally after that, she became a practicing analyst in New York and Los Angeles. Today she is barely remembered as a movie actress. (Rule died in October 2003, at age seventy-two.)*

Rule illustrates a seldom-mentioned aspect of show business: For many, it's not all that exciting. Once having achieved a certain level, they turn away to other things that mean more to them. To be a movie star required real focus and sacrifice. Not everyone wanted it *that* much once they saw what it really was. This is a malfunction of choice, which is very different from failure.

It was hard to become a star, and sometimes, even with *extra* help, it didn't work. There were young women whose looks were good, not extraordinary, who got plum parts because of connections: Joy Ann Page, who played a significant role in *Casablanca* as the young bride who asks Bogart's advice, as well as a strong supporting role in the 1944 *Kismet*, as Ronald Colman's daughter; Joan Evans, who starred opposite Farley Granger in *Roseanna McCoy* (1949); and K. T. Stevens, whose main asset was her initials. Page was Jack Warner's stepdaughter, Evans was the daughter of two famous movie magazine writers, Dale Eunson and Katherine Albert; and Stevens was the daughter of director Sam Wood. Page, Evans, and Stevens were backed up by power, but they did not have what it took. Perhaps it was personal choice that took them out of the business, or perhaps it was lack of audience response to their qualities, but even with the help of the star machine, they malfunctioned.

Sometimes a potential star gave up before arrival at the very top yet kept on working. Claire Trevor won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress (*Key Largo* [1948]), but she never quite broke into the ranks of actual stardom. Despite many opportunities to break through—the female lead in *Stagecoach* (1939), an Oscar-nominated part in *Dead End* (1937), and a flashy villainess in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944)—Trevor ended up “in support.”* She herself defined the reason: “My heart was seldom in my work. I was bewitched by the legitimate stage and considered Hollywood a bad joke.” She also often said she did not have the drive it took for a female to survive in the studio system. (It's no secret that the great

female stars like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford placed their careers above everything.) Trevor defined what stardom required: “To make a real career in Hollywood, you have to become a personality, have to cultivate publicity departments, and become known as ‘the Ear’ or even ‘the Toe.’” Trevor, who had a long and relatively successful career, is not as much a malfunction as she is a non-function. She never cooperated fully with the machine’s process.

Sometimes the machine authored its own undoing. Eager to push a newcomer, the business would occasionally *tell* the public “a star is born” right on screen in the credits. These powerful “and introducing...” title cards for newcomers were usually the kiss of death. Maybe the audience just couldn’t take the hint, but a bravura “and introducing” send-off usually turned out to be an epitaph. “And introducing Douglas Dick” in *The Searching Wind* (1946) illustrates the point. A classic example is Roberta Haynes, who was cast opposite Gary Cooper in 1953. The movie was to launch a big career for her, as she was given a showcase role opposite a genuine legend. But Haynes was “introduced” into limbo. Today she’s a guaranteed winner in any trivia contest that asks, “Who was Gary Cooper’s co-star in *Return to Paradise*?” (Try it. Mail me half your winnings.) The kiss of death was still on this billing as late as 1962, when it was given to Mariette Hartley in *Ride the High Country*. Hartley found fame playing James Garner’s wife in Polaroid commercials on TV, but she never did become a movie star.*

It’s one thing when the machine works its voodoo but malfunctions and a talented person doesn’t become a star. It’s quite another when the machine malfunctions because it promotes an untalented star who *does* succeed. The business would never call that a malfunction because, to them, it wasn’t. (It’s more a malfunction of public taste.) For instance, although Claire Trevor didn’t totally make it, the relatively untalented Alexis Smith *did*. Although she was beautiful, photogenic, and could wear clothes well, she had a frozen quality that couldn’t get her within four miles of an acting Oscar. But there was a reason Smith broke through despite her limitations. She was at Warners when they needed an elegant leading lady who wasn’t too sexy or tough (like Sheridan),

too neurotic (like Davis), too edgy (like Lupino), or too determined to break free of them (de Havilland). They needed a pliant everyday beauty—an Alexis Smith—to star opposite Bogart, Flynn, Cary Grant, Charles Boyer, and Dennis Morgan. Smith was in the right place at the right time, a benefactor of a kind of “trickle-down” stardom. All she had to do was wear clothes, look good, and cooperate, because she would be paired with the best. Later in life, she would prove she could sing and dance, appearing onstage in Stephen Sondheim’s *Follies*, but in her movie roles, as she said, “Jack Warner...saw me as a decoration.” And that’s how he used her. She became a decorative movie star, a calm in the Warners female-star storm.

Another trickle-down stardom example that should have malfunctioned was the inexplicable Vera-Ellen.[†] She couldn’t act. She was a mediocre dancer. Her singing had to be dubbed. And she was anorexic. Yet she became a star. Not a big star, admittedly, but still, a star. Like Alexis Smith, Vera-Ellen fulfilled a function. MGM made a great many musicals, and they needed more than one leading lady dancer; Cyd Charisse couldn’t do it all. So Vera-Ellen danced on film with Astaire and Kelly, and by virtue of the company she was keeping, became a star at a top studio.

Many people who know film history believe that the ultimate inexplicable example of failed stardom is the blond singer-dancer Barbara Lawrence. She had won a children’s beauty contest and become a professional model at the age of five. In 1944, Lawrence was on a modeling assignment when she learned that 20th Century-Fox had a casting call for showgirls, so she tried out. Fox put her under contract and used her in the chorus line of Betty Grable’s *Billy Rose’s Diamond Horseshoe* (1945). Barbara Jo Lawrence (her real name) was tall, slender, radiantly beautiful, and a natural blonde with long, thick hair. She looked like a real winner, and Fox was delighted, preparing to groom her for major stardom. And then they found out she was barely fifteen years old.* Appalled that they had been parading an underage girl around in feathers and evening gowns, they quickly shoved her into their studio school and tried to

forget about her, deciding to use the next two years on her grooming process, hoping she'd sooner or later be a replacement for Grable.



The beautiful and talented Barbara Lawrence, a definitive example of “why didn’t she make it?”, a malfunction no one can explain.

BELOW: Barbara Lawrence at the peak of her career, surrounded by Linda Darnell, Kurt Kreuger, Rudy Vallee (with binoculars) in Preston Sturges’s *Unfaithfully Yours*.



In 1946, when Lawrence was sixteen, Fox suddenly had a casting problem that caused them to remember her. June Haver, the *other*

lovely young blonde they were grooming to replace Betty Grable, was tied up filming *Three Little Girls in Blue* when Fox was ready to start filming a movie called *Margie*. They had hoped to use Haver, but she was unavailable. Barbara Lawrence (the Jo had been dropped) had been a stand-in for Haver in wardrobe tests for *Margie*. When Darryl Zanuck saw the tests, he gave her Haver's role. (Haver was already a star anyway, and the role was more supporting than starring.) So Barbara Lawrence stepped into *Margie* in a showcase part, the small-town siren who was the gorgeous rival to plain-Jane Margie (Jeanne Crain). Lawrence plays the girl who has everything Margie has ever wanted for herself: looks, clothes, boyfriends, self-confidence, and the nerve to rouge her knees and to neck with a guy on her own front porch. Lawrence, who is excellent, has one terrific musical number, "A Cup of Coffee, a Sandwich, and You," and plenty of key moments to call her own. She even ice-skates! Both reviewers and audiences noticed her, and she seemed to be on her way, next playing Tyrone Power's wealthy love in the lavish costume film *Captain from Castile* (1947). By her fifth movie, Lawrence was well recognized and was cast as Dan Dailey's sister in *Give My Regards to Broadway* (1948), sharing a musical number with him. Fox then tried a generic "departure" for her, testing her flexibility by taking her out of musicals and into the film noir role of a cheap blond gangster's moll in *The Street with No Name* (1948). The same year, she hit gold by being cast in Preston Sturges's *Unfaithfully Yours*.

Lawrence was at the peak of her beauty—and her billing. Four names appeared on the credits above *Unfaithfully Yours*: Rex Harrison, Linda Darnell, Rudy Vallee, Barbara Lawrence, in that order. Lawrence (whose name in the film is Barbara) swans around eating chocolates, wearing a maribou-trimmed dressing gown set off by a diamond necklace with matching earrings. She's first glimpsed dressed in high 1940s glamour: leopard-skin skirt and a scarf, an all-black hat, gloves and coat, standing, waiting at an airport, dragging on a cigarette, and looking as bored as any beautiful woman can look. Her delivery of her cheerfully contemptuous lines is the perfect Sturgesan counterpoint to a musically written script about a

musician. Lawrence plays the disenchanted wife of Rudy Vallee, who, as always, is a wealthy uptight fool who has somehow managed to bag a beautiful piece of arm candy. Since he's rich, that might not seem so odd, but Vallee's candy is sharp-witted and sharp-tongued. When Lawrence watches Harrison kiss Darnell with great passion, she indicates Vallee's glasses and drawls, "Put 'em back on your nose and learn something." Throughout the movie she nonchalantly treats her husband as if he's her great burden in life. ("Come on, stupid," she says to him.) When he intones pompously, "Give me the simple viewpoint," she responds, "You've got it, boy, you don't have to yearn for it."

Lawrence's role is actually very small, but every time she's on the screen she makes a great moment out of it. She's Eve Arden and Lana Turner in one package. Yet she would never again appear in a film of such quality, with billing equal to stars of such caliber. Never again would she display quite this level of glamorous sheen, with her wet lips, blond hair, and eyelashes that work like street sweepers.

Lawrence was only eighteen years old when *Unfaithfully Yours* was released in 1948. The studio was famous for grooming young blondes for musicals, and she had proved she could sing and dance as well as do comedy and drama. She was ready to be moved up to major stardom. Instead, in 1949, she stepped down in a series of sister roles, lose-the-guy roles, friend-of-the-daughter roles. She was Linda Darnell's sister in *A Letter to Three Wives*, a college coed friend of Loretta Young's daughter in *Mother Is a Freshman*, the girl who loses the hero to Valentina Cortese in *Thieves' Highway*, Diana Lynn's sister in *Peggy* (July 1950). Lawrence was always billed fourth or even fifth. She hit you'll-never-be-a-star bottom when she had to play herself, "Barbara Lawrence," in the 1953 Bette Davis movie *The Star*. Lawrence, as Barbara Lawrence, is presented as the hot new property the studio chooses to replace the aging Davis character, Margaret Eliot. (Davis, in a sense, is also playing herself. And Joan Crawford. Rumors said that the screenwriters, Katherine Albert and Dale Eunson, who had been close friends of Crawford's, based the role on her.) The story line concerns how a studio is grooming

“Lawrence” and preparing her to play the lead in a big film about a sexy young girl, which Eliot always felt was the perfect role for her. Everywhere Davis goes, people are talking about Lawrence, whose photo is seen around the studio, on the walls, in offices, and outside on posters. She herself, however, is seen only briefly, when she arrives at a Hollywood party wearing a low-cut gown, a white fox fur, and diamonds on her ears, at her neck, on her wrists, and in her hair.

No actress should ever play a movie star in a movie unless it's the leading role (Lana Turner in *The Bad and the Beautiful* [1952], Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* [1950]) or a hilarious cameo (Ernest Borgnine, pushing his grocery cart, attacked by would-be filmmakers in *Mistress* [1991]). In *The Star*, Lawrence proves she's not a star—and will never be a star—because she's perfect playing someone who is *not* yet a star. Sadly, she was locking herself into failure. From 1953 onward, her roles were mostly in B pictures, and when they were A-level (as in Greer Garson's *Her Twelve Men* [1954], or the film version of *Oklahoma!* in 1955), her roles were insignificant. After *The Star*, she made only nine more films, officially ending her movie career in 1958. Although she appeared in theatre and successful television shows such as *Perry Mason* and *Riverboat*, she *never* became a star.

Barbara Lawrence had it all. The looks, the talent, the versatility, and the opportunity. What happened? Well, for one thing, she was very tall, with a slightly string-beanish quality. But more important, her height meant that even in flat shoes she was the same size as Dan Dailey. This was a problem—not one that couldn't be fixed, but a problem nonetheless. Second, Lawrence had a quality that Hollywood found hard to deal with, in that her voice was low and quirky, more suitable for throwing comedy lines over her shoulder than cooing at a man. In fact, she's very reminiscent of another tall, inherently comic, yet beautiful and potentially glamorous young woman: Lucille Ball. Hollywood never really knew what to do with her either. Ball was another strange mixture of something very glamorous and sexy and something oddly offbeat and comic. This was a hard female type to put into a leading-lady niche, and

Lawrence suffered accordingly. And there was another issue: Betty Grable didn't drop out as Fox's leading musical blonde until 1955, and June Haver had already succeeded as her official replacement. Haver's own replacement, Sheree North, was being developed at the same time, but, most important of all, a dark horse, an unexpected blond champion, arrived out of left field and claimed Fox's publicity machine as her own. Her name was Marilyn Monroe. She, too, could sing, dance, do both comedy and drama—and was even more lovely, talented, and charismatic than Lawrence. Barbara Jo Lawrence was in the wrong place at the wrong time. She wasn't Marilyn Monroe, and no one else was either.

Marilyn Monroe skyrocketed to spectacular fame, effectively eradicating Lawrence. She was one of the last—if not actually the last—truly big female star to be “built up” by the star machine the old-fashioned way. During the years 1951 to 1953, she began to appear in bit parts, and then moved on to big-budget movies, magazine covers, newsreels, the works. Allegedly, Monroe came out of nowhere, but that “nowhere” was the usual time of development and growth, in her case a four-year apprenticeship in bit parts and walk-ons.* For those who might wonder why no one saw malfunctions coming in advance, Monroe's case is a perfect study. Her legend suggests that audiences spotted her right off the bat and insisted the studio “make that girl a star!” The myth of “the audience speaks” has occasionally been true, as in the cases of Tyrone Power or Gary Cooper,† but it's usually the result of some careful planning. For instance, in Monroe's case, she appeared in four movies in 1950: *A Ticket to Tomahawk*, *Right Cross*, *All About Eve*, and *The Asphalt Jungle*. In *Tomahawk*, she's one of the girls in the chorus line behind Dan Dailey, and in *Right Cross* she's sitting in the background of a fancy restaurant/bar, playing a girl Dick Powell has just decided to stand up. He walks over and brushes her off—no magic. These two roles—one with no dialogue—do not make you go, “Wow! I see a star back there” (and they didn't in 1950 either). What happens today is viewers say, “Wow! I see Marilyn Monroe back there,” which is not the same thing.

It was her two small speaking roles in *The Asphalt Jungle* and *All About Eve* that caused everyone to notice her. In these two outstanding movies, directed, written, photographed, and designed by top movie personnel, Monroe was showcased. Her hair, her costumes, her poses, her co-stars, and, above all, her dialogue were first-rate. In *The Asphalt Jungle*, director John Huston lets the camera linger over her voluptuous body as she leans back on a chaise longue and seductively, poutingly, delivers her purring and well-written lines. In *All About Eve*, she enters the frame in strapless gown, fur, and jewels, and on the arm of no less than George Sanders. Again her lines, written by director Joseph Mankiewicz, are witty and memorable. In two quality films, she gets noticed—and is on her way to becoming an “overnight sensation.” What Monroe’s two memorable 1950 films show us is well explained by David Thomson: “These situations, as well as the attitude toward her of other actors, reflected the knowledge at the Fox Studios that she was picked out for higher things.” (Thomson adds, “Gossip would not have been slow to provide the means by which she negotiated the executive office.”) Fox, experienced at grooming successful sexy blond stars, chose to pull Monroe out of the ranks and give her everything they had in the buildup, even though some of her directors really didn’t see her as all that unusual. (Fritz Lang, who directed her in 1952’s *Clash by Night*, said, “She was a peculiar mixture of shyness and uncertainty and—I wouldn’t say ‘star allure’—but she knew exactly her impact on men.”*)

The stories of Barbara Lawrence and Marilyn Monroe illustrate the vagaries of stardom malfunction. Lawrence was on her way, but Monroe got in her way. Monroe was unique, but she, too, could have gotten lost in the system as her four 1950 movies illustrate. The star machine did its work for both women, but Monroe could bring something to her moments that Lawrence, as talented as she was, could not. The audience knew the difference, and once the machine polished up Monroe and set her up as proper bait, the audience bit—and Monroe and the studio system took it from there.

Monroe’s success was spectacular, although she was not really “an overnight success.” But the speed with which she arrived is

hardly the point. The business never cared whether it was “overnight” or “more than five years,” as long as sooner or later she went over with the public. In fact, one of the things the business feared was moving too quickly, lest an investment not pay off. The reasons malfunctions were tolerated is that they were considered a legitimate risk.

Ironically, Hollywood the business was totally dependent on audience response and yet mistrusted it. They usually preferred to test it—and test it again—before they fully invested in the popularity of any newcomer. It’s also surprising how smoothly malfunctions could be swallowed into the system and how little money was wasted dumping them. Potential stars who didn’t work out were moved down into the supporting category. They were made into “stars” for the B-picture unit. They were dropped. They went into real estate or returned to Podunk Village. One truly successful star who thrived at the box office could easily pay for fifteen or twenty failures. The studios absorbed their mistakes and rolled on. When the machine failed with a product, the businesspeople involved cleverly shifted focus and absolved themselves of all blame. Onward and upward. The business was utterly realistic and prepared to regroup. If someone didn’t work out, there were plenty of others in the wings.

In hindsight, we can look at the legendary movie stars of old Hollywood and feel that we understand why they made it. But as with Marilyn Monroe, we are looking at end product—groomed, showcased, shaped, and supported. If some of the malfunctions had been assigned better roles, or better advisers, or had come along in a different decade, or not been compared unfavorably to already established stars, or hadn’t run away from it, bungled it, or even died, what might have happened? It’s impossible to know.

* When we review all these movies today, taking them out of their own times, we can see that Crawford is actually excellent as Sadie Thompson, Sinatra is charming as the cowardly son of a notorious bandit, and *Ishtar* has become a cult-favorite comedy. Crawford, Sinatra, Beatty, and Hoffman are all stars entitled to their failures.

* When the films of some formerly successful movie stars are revived today, these stars *do* translate well for the modern audience that suddenly “discovers” them. They aren’t cases of malfunction; they’re cases of “temporarily forgotten.” Clara Bow is still hot, still sexy. Janet Gaynor is still adorable (and can act as well). Will Rogers still has folksy charm, even if it does make him a bit of a dinosaur. And Rin Tin Tin can still bark and upstage any two-legged rival.

† Montgomery is famous today for one film which is often revived—his directorial and starring turn in *Lady in the Lake* (1946), a famous experiment in camera subjectivity. This means that the one movie a modern audience likes Montgomery in is one in which technically he doesn’t appear!

* No wonder she was fired from *For Whom the Bell Tolls* after filming began, replaced by Ingrid Bergman.

* My favorite “Watch Bing Crosby Cope with Any Co-star” moment has to be the duet he sang with David Bowie on his posthumously aired *42nd Annual Christmas Special* of 1977. Once again, Crosby rises to the occasion, friendly and unflappable, not in the least alarmed by Bowie’s terrifying thinness or razor-sharp incisors. He sets a relaxed but classy tone, to which Bowie is forced to adapt, and the two achieve a moment of genuine warmth singing “The Little Drummer Boy” together.

* Some people in the business claim that Paramount wanted to sign her because their top musical comedy star, Betty Hutton, had just walked out on her contract and they were looking for a replacement.

* The number was performed with Ferrer, who had by then become her husband. In the film, he plays the leading role of Sigmund Romberg, who wrote the song.

Today, Madonna would be a similar example. A huge singing star, she has never been able to achieve movie stardom despite excellent opportunities, such as the title role in *Evita* (1996).

* McCracken was a member of the dancing corps for the show, and in “Many a New Day” the choreography presented a trio of young girls allegedly dreaming of the young men they might meet or marry. In the middle of the dance, a gaminlike young girl ran out to join them, but when she pushed up onto her foot—bang!—she fell down! She then became the tomboy variation of the group, totally winning over the audience. Since she was not billed separately from the dance troupe, McCracken became known as “the girl who falls down” and was later billed that way.

* Perhaps Mary Martin's career never took off because she always could return to the theatre, her first love.

* His son, Alan, also was not star material for movies. He was, however, a gigantic hit on the small screen in the television hit series *M*A*S*H*. Oddly enough, the reassuring imperfections Robert Alda lacked—Alan Alda had them. Bad teeth, gangly body, weird hair, and a definite sense that he was going crazy inside. Alan Alda was deeply cynical for a deeply cynical age, playing Hawkeye, a wounded healer, a man forced to clean up the mess in Korea, which audiences were meant to read as Vietnam. After he became successful on TV, he had some success in big-screen movies, but not much. Currently he has found his métier playing character roles in movies, some of whom aren't very nice guys, as in *The Aviator* (2004), where he is brilliant as a corrupt senator.

* Alda did eventually find fame, playing Sky Masterson in the original *Guys and Dolls* on Broadway.

* Strudwick did not become a major star, but he had a long and worthy career in stock, stage, film, and TV roles for more than fifty years. (Sources vary as to whether his birth name was John, Shepperd, or both.)

* Russell was directed by enough great male directors to ensure her immortality: Raoul Walsh, Howard Hawks, Frank Tashlin, Josef von Sternberg, Allan Dwan, and Nicholas Ray.

† Nancy Davis, who married Ronald Reagan, was one of these studio girls, but she was different. She was a decent actress, although not a great beauty. This gave her the chance to be more of a character-type leading lady, as when she played the pregnant wife in *The Next Voice You Hear* (1950) or the interesting “best friend” to Barbara Stanwyck in *East Side, West Side* (1949).

* Another such actress was Peggy Dow. Her film success was similar to Rule's, but she has one movie that is frequently revived, *Harvey* (1950), starring Jimmy Stewart. Thus, she is at least around for new audiences to appreciate. She also appeared in some low-budget noir movies of the 1950s, such as *Undertow* (1949). Dow left the business to marry. She became the mother of five sons and has been rewarded repeatedly for her charitable works in the state of Oklahoma, also receiving an honorary degree from the University of Oklahoma.

* However, it might be said that Trevor got the career she wanted: a respectable one full of rich performances that make the films work, as opposed to a flashy kind of movie stardom that might have died with her youth. Trevor lasted.

* Sometimes it worked: “and introducing Mario Lanza” (*That Midnight Kiss* [1949]) or “introducing Goldie Hawn as Toni” in *Cactus Flower* (1969).

† Vera-Ellen was developed as a star property by Samuel Goldwyn and played her first significant roles at his studio, especially opposite Danny Kaye. Goldwyn's track record as a developer of female stars who failed or ought to have failed is fairly amazing.

* Barbara Jo Lawrence was born February 24, 1930. She was just fourteen when Fox first signed her.

* After Marilyn Monroe's two "star-making" bit parts—*The Asphalt Jungle* and *All About Eve* (both 1950)—she made four movies in 1951 and five in 1952. By 1953, she was a major motion picture star and a household name.

† Anytime the audience noticed someone and brought that person to their attention, however, the studios were right on it. I can testify to two personal experiences of "fan response" to a face on-screen. When I ushered for *White Christmas* in 1954, every night the same thing happened to the audience at the exact same moment in the film. As the star, Rosemary Clooney, sings her big number, "Love, You Didn't Do Right by Me," two young male dancers move toward her, backs to the camera. One at a time, they turn their profiles to face her, and when the one on the left turned, his looks always excited whoops and hollers from the women in the audience. Every single time. He turned out to be George Chakiris, who would win an Oscar for his supporting role in *West Side Story* (1961). This was a case in which the audience found him first, and the business responded. (Since Chakiris is more or less forgotten today, perhaps the women weren't all that astute.) The second response was to the face of the very beautiful Jacqueline Bisset in *Two for the Road* in 1967. When she is given a close-up early in the movie, the men in the audience yelled out various comments about her. (Alas, she disappears from the plot almost immediately.) She, too, became a star for a period of time.

* Monroe had no impact on audiences in the movie houses I ushered in, not the way I had seen Debbie Reynolds come across in her "Abba Dabba Honeymoon" number in *Two Weeks with Love* (1950), or Montgomery Clift in his love scenes with Joanne Dru in *Red River* (1948). No one went "oooh" or applauded or left the theatre talking about her. I saw and heard a lot of audiences during the years 1948 to 1958, and Monroe didn't reach them the way she reached critics or the way she touched people after her death. Her still photograph had flesh impact in a way her moving image did not. I think of her as a phenomenon of photography more than of film. When she delivers her famous line in *All About Eve*, about the producer she's being sent over to seduce and flatter—"Why do they always look like unhappy rabbits?"—she herself looks exactly like one. Her movie image was strangely enlivened by her death, freshened by tragedy, made dimensional by offscreen facts.

PART TWO

PROBLEMS FOR THE SYSTEM: THE HUMAN FACTOR



There were reasons why some stars felt disconnected from what they were required to do for their art. Maria Montez pitchforks up some lunch for the livestock ... Joan Blondell milks a cow ... June Allyson hangs out the wash ... and Loretta Young rustles up some hot grub.

Just remember, it's ninety percent hard work.

—How to Become a Movie Star, 1946

t was one thing to have the machine malfunction. It was another to have it work perfectly and then backfire. Always ready to deal with failures, the business wasn't ready to deal with successful movie stars who were built to bring in millions and who suddenly began to grumble about the terms of the deal they had made. But this happened, and there was no simple way to create a business plan to manage it. Malfunctions of the machine process were systemic. The daily complaints from working movie stars were human. And if there was anything the Hollywood moviemaking business resisted, it was humanity.

The ordinary little problems of the daily workforce, the labor issues, became very expensive when the laborers were movie stars. The machine process was constructed specifically to identify cooperative performers and to teach them that they'd have to obey orders. Yet in a significant minority of cases, the arrivals forgot that and started making trouble. What happened? Why didn't all the movie stars created by the machine live happily ever after as long as they stayed off the pills, avoided gangsters, and didn't adopt babies who grew up to write nasty books about them? What the heck was their problem?

In many cases, there was a disconnect between what the studio wanted and what the movie star wanted. In the beginning, both studio and performer worked harmoniously toward the same goal: stardom. Their motivations, however, may not have been exactly the same. Cary Grant said, "I think most of us become actors because we want affection, love, and applause." The business, of course, wanted financial gain. The studios were prepared to be helpful parents to the needy little children who were going to grow up to be big, big stars, as long as they did what they were told. Everyone wanted to get there, so there weren't many troublemakers along the way. Later on, however, things started to get wobbly for some stars, especially after they'd had a little time at the top and realized fully the situation they were in. "The deck was stacked against us," said Alice Faye.

Faye wasn't alone in her perception. Once certain stars settled in, they didn't like the daily life. Although the business sold the public

the idea that a movie star lived in a world of furs and fashions, racing cars and polo ponies, swimming pools and servants, champagne and caviar, the truth was quite different. Yes, they made a lot of money, and yes, they had lovely homes and full staffs, and yes, they did buy ponies and furs and cars—but. Popular movie stars worked like dogs on the privacy-invading treadmill they had chosen to embrace as their profession. Songwriter Harry Warren sadly observed, “[Stars] always have to become remote ... they all do ... from what I could see of it, there wasn’t anything easy about being a star.” Too late, some of them understood what they had signed up for. The world called them movie stars, but the devilish business they worked in called them product.*

The situation for any movie star began with the signing of the much-coveted “exclusive” seven-year contract. This contract officially marked the arrival of a star to the top rank, and almost everyone signed it with joy. Seven years of security and top money! Seven years, of course, was also exactly the same amount of bad-luck time you’d get if you broke a mirror. “They promised me a rose garden,” Joan Crawford said about this period, “and they gave it to me ... acre by acre.”

These seven-year contracts bound the individual to the studio. They required the signer to accept any role the studio wanted him to play and to cooperate fully regarding publicity. Studios required a “star” to work a forty-week year. The other twelve weeks, for which they would not be paid, were an alleged “vacation.” The studio had the right to terminate the contract, dropping the star for any reason, or to renegotiate the contract on its own terms if the star began to lose popularity. The star couldn’t quit, nor could he or she just bop over to another studio and try to negotiate something better. Stars, in fact, couldn’t really negotiate much of anything—not better roles, more money, better work conditions. This is not to say that clever actors and actresses didn’t find ways to wheedle things, or that they didn’t fight to play Scarlett O’Hara or get more money. Some of their little negotiations were pathetic. Jeanette MacDonald insisted that anytime she went anywhere—to a wedding, a funeral, an event—her presence should be defined as “studio

requested” so she’d be paid or so that she could deduct the cost of her clothing. Gable bargained for a “flight clause”—he would fly only if he approved the make of the airplane and if the airplane had more than two engines and a licensed pilot. Susan Hayward negotiated control of her hair (no cutting unless she said okay), and Gene Tierney controlled her own teeth. Most of these “rights” were won long after the individuals had become really big stars, and they represent the only things available to negotiation: small perks and coddled whims.*

The hard legal facts of star contracts were clear. Movie stars could not do anything except work for the studio that had signed them for seven years. The studio would decide exactly how the star should be seen, advertised, cast, and promoted. Studio management not only could put stars in any movie it chose, it could also change or transform the star in any way it wished. The studio gained the legal right to dye hair, dictate plastic and dental surgery, and assign interviews, “dates” (for promotional purposes), public appearances, and endorsements. No star was supposed to marry without studio permission (although some did). “The studios controlled our lives completely,” said teen star Jimmy Lydon. “They told us who to go out with and where to go ... they owned us like a piece of furniture.” The studio also reserved the right to loan the star (with no consultation or permission) to another studio if it seemed desirable. Such negotiations reflect the practical nature of the business, which traded stars back and forth according to any studio’s need, and which reveal how studios cooperated with one another when something was in the interest of both parties. The studios paid one another for these loan-outs, with none of the money going to the star. (In fact, David O. Selznick survived financially by loaning out the stars he signed and created: Ingrid Bergman, Jennifer Jones, Joseph Cotten, and others.) Although the standard seven-year contract did provide for regular salary increases, and sometimes bonuses—or large jumps due to success—it completely favored the studio. And it was ironbound. If a star got uppity and refused to show up to make some harebrained movie about zombies, the studio put that person on “suspension.”

“Suspension” meant that all the time the star sat home would be added to the end of the seven-year contract, effectively meaning that the star could be under contract for nine years rather than seven. Needless to say, no star was paid a salary while on suspension.

The star system was a slave system—albeit a highly paid, glamorous slave system in which the slaves were more famous than their owners. “Yes,” said Ann Rutherford, “we were really like slaves. You were chattels of the studios. They could buy and sell you.”

Movie stars had a six-day workweek (they worked on Saturdays back then), with the day beginning at 7:00 a.m. and stretching to the end of the day. Although they were supposed to work only until 6:00 p.m., more often than not, evening shoots were required and they remained on the lot until seven or eight, or even nine o’clock at night.* At whatever time stars left the set to go home, they still faced work: learning lines for the next day’s shoot and needing to be in bed by ten so as to look good for the cameras the next day. Actual shooting began promptly at 9:00 a.m., and the star had to be ready—hair, makeup, and costume perfectly in place, lines learned. Not for the star was the casual stroll onto the lot just minutes before film began to roll. Asked what would happen to a star who was habitually late at MGM in the 1930s, Joan Crawford looked astonished, did a double take, and said, “I can’t remember anyone ever being late.” Pressed, she grew stern. “No one was *ever* late,” she stated firmly. “But what if they were?” “They were *not*.” Stars who were unreliable soon enough were no longer stars, and up-and-comers who were late soon became down-and-outers.†

A movie star’s day was long and exhausting, with very little free time, because there was more for a star to do than act. When stars were not in front of the camera under the hot klieg lights, they were assigned other tasks, the ones that had gotten them there but were even more necessary now. They posed for still or “portrait” photographers, ‡ gave predetermined (and scripted) interviews, learned lines for future scenes and relearned lines that had been

rewritten and changed since they learned them the first time, continued to take lessons in acting and diction and manners, learned songs and dance numbers and rehearsed them, did wardrobe tests and fittings for the next assignment, made screen tests with newcomers, posed for elaborate fashion layouts, and met visiting dignitaries and selected fans. Everyone in the movie business worked hard, but stars were under terrific pressure. Crawford's second husband, Franchot Tone, himself an actor, described what it was like to maintain her "complex schedule": "She must get her homework done, her lines learned every day. She has continuous meetings with the producer or the director or somebody else equally important each evening. She has to get up at four or four-thirty in the morning in order to get to the hairdresser and onto the set. She needs a massage at night before she can sleep for a few hours. She has to eat sparingly and exercise constantly. This goes on and on ... and when Saturday night comes ... other duties, other priorities arise. Conferences about the next script. Talks about dancing lessons. Discussions about yoga, tennis, and swimming lessons ... she's a star."



Stars just wanna have fun. This photo was taken on the set of *Meet John Doe* as a joke. Edward Arnold rubs Barbara Stanwyck's feet, and Gary Cooper pretends to knit.

One of the star's most tedious chores was standing still for wardrobe fittings as described by Myrna Loy: "Each costume had to be tried on for endless camera tests, because no matter how good it may look in the fitting room, it's the eye of the camera that must be satisfied. Every detail has to be perfect in advance, so as not to hold up shooting or cause a need for reshoots ... this required me to stand patiently and quietly for hours at a time." There was no sitting around. If there *were* waits between scenes so lights could be rapidly readjusted (and sending the star off the set to do another task wouldn't be economical), stars needed to either remove their costumes in their dressing rooms or lean against ironing boards that were set up—wrinkles were not allowed. During such waits, which were described as "the boredom of hell," individuals had to find their own amusement.* Sadly, stars found that their arrival at the top hadn't necessarily changed their lives all for the better.

When the cameras weren't rolling and lights were being moved or checked for another take of the same scene, stars had to sit still while a team of men and women touched up their makeup, cemented on nails, checked their wardrobe, pulled on their hair, or looked them over for continuity flaws that the camera would notice—little flaws that hadn't been there in the previous take, such as a curl out of place or a smudge on a sleeve. If they were fully made up and costumed, waiting for the call of "action," they weren't allowed to eat, read, sleep, talk on the telephone, or smoke. (They could have coffee or smoke if their makeup was going to be retouched.)

No studio ever expected a star to complain about any of this or, God forbid, call in sick. In fact, the studios expected a great deal, and some players not only didn't like it but couldn't stand up to the pressure. One such was the hauntingly beautiful Gail Russell. She made her first movie—*Henry Aldrich Gets Glamour*—in 1943, and played her first important role in *The Uninvited* in 1944. Her

ethereally beautiful face, surrounded by a dark cloud of thick black hair, was one of the loveliest ever to grace the movie screen. Russell was only eighteen when she started in movies, an amateur among professionals, and her inexperience overwhelmed her. She wasn't strong enough to survive the harsh reality of filmmaking, and she was limited in talent. In 1945, she started drinking on the set to get over her stage fright. By the end of the 1940s, she was a heavy drinker and having trouble remembering her lines. In 1953, she was arrested for drunk driving and entered a sanitarium. By 1955, she was in Alcoholics Anonymous but by 1957 had fallen off the wagon and was arrested for drunk driving for the seventh time. In 1961 she was found dead in her apartment, surrounded by empty vodka bottles. She was only thirty-five years old. Her comment on stardom was simple and contained no joy: "There was always a sense of pressure, no time to think or relax. I just wanted to be alone to take stock, and it wasn't possible. Film work was just too demanding."

The movie business made a product that cost a great deal of money to produce—and no one took the time to care for an individual's problems. The star had to keep up, and if not, the studios could be callous. The tragic death of Jean Harlow, and the studio's response to it, illustrates both her high value as a star and the ruthlessness with which her studio quickly devalued her. Harlow's death (at age twenty-six) came before she had completed her final movie, *Saratoga* (a 1937 release). MGM knew her fans would want to see her more than ever after she died so young and tragically. Having shot more than 70 percent of the film, the studio protected its investment by simply finishing it without her and releasing it immediately to exploit her death.* Harlow's stand-in stood in. The audience sees cast members chatting at the races, while "Harlow," in a big hat with binoculars glued to her face, watches the horses run. Or "Harlow" (her stand-in, of course) sits with her back to the camera, while someone offers her tea, or she sits in shadows. Lines of dialogue that she had prerecorded were dubbed in. As a live star, Harlow's worth was unlimited. As a dead star, she was still worth a bundle. *Dead?* What movie star was ever really dead? Harlow could be faked; she herself didn't matter all

that much. (This issue is compounded today, with digital imaging. As Isabella Rossellini said about a filmed image of her mother, Ingrid Bergman, being marketed in television ads: “Poor Mother. Dead nearly twenty-five years and *still* working.”)

Considering the long hours, the hard work, the restrictions, and the slavery involved, why would anyone want to be a movie star? (Ava Gardner said, “Stardom gave me everything I never wanted,” and Judy Garland commented, “If I’m such a legend, why am I so lonely?”†) Individual stars would give individual answers, but in the 1930s and ’40s, movie stardom was the most glamorous, desirable, respected, beloved profession in the world that uneducated and sometimes untalented people could enter. And it was glamorous, desirable, respected, and beloved for the educated and the talented also. Los Angeles was a beautiful little city, clean and efficient, and the surrounding areas were lush with flowers, trees, and the smell of orange blossoms. Acting was a profession that promised a lifestyle that could only be dreamed about, and there was the added allure of “We’ll take care of things for you.” The studios “took care of things.” “We were princes and princesses,” said Lana Turner, “protected and cherished.” Need a loan to buy a house? The studio would give you one, never mind those nasty old banks. The studio would provide, as long as it wasn’t a vacation or time off, more money than they thought you were worth, or roles they didn’t want you to play. In those days, being a movie star was a kind of royalty, and the livin’ was easy. It was the work that was hard. Even so, most of Hollywood’s golden-era movie stars in their later years talked about how much fun they had on the sets, playing jokes on one another, or they talked about how much their careers meant to them, and how willing they were to do the work, or how loved and appreciated by their fans they felt. They felt secure and beloved in a time when that really meant something. Despite all the restrictions, they were doing something they wanted to be doing, and the final plus was the obvious one: money. They made lots of money. They didn’t always have time to spend it or enjoy it—but they had money. Mickey Rooney nailed it down, explaining the deal MGM had first offered

him: "I'd start at \$150 per week ... I'd be guaranteed forty weeks a year. To a fourteen-year-old who had been selling newspapers on the corner ... only a few weeks before ... it didn't matter to me that MGM would have total artistic control over everything I did. I was now part of the MGM family ... and as one of those stars, I'd find fame and fortune. I'd be rich."

In fact, stardom *could* be a good life. In contrast to the tragedy of a sensitive Gail Russell is the born-in-a-trunk story of Joan Blondell. Blondell *was* sensitive, and she had her own troubles, but she could survive them. Her parents were in vaudeville, and by the age of three, Blondell (born in 1906) was already a working member of her family troupe. About the time movies started to put vaudeville out of business, Blondell had become a luscious teenager with solid acting experience, and she was prepared to become a breadwinner. She had already helped her family through some lean years by winning a beauty contest with a cash prize of \$2,000 ("The family needed whatever I could earn," she said), and she had made a name for herself on Broadway opposite James Cagney in *Penny Arcade* in 1929. Like everyone else in America, she headed for Hollywood, but out of necessity, not choice. She wasn't one of the starstruck small-town girls who came to Tinseltown to become a movie star. "My ambition," she said, "was to make a buck." Warners had bought the rights to *Penny Arcade*, changed the title to the sexier *Sinner's Holiday*, and considered Cagney and Blondell for their original roles but decided that they were too inexperienced in movies to carry the leads. (They cast Grant Withers and Evelyn Knapp instead.) Cagney and Blondell, however, were given small parts as compensation.

Blondell was never naïve. When Warners tried to begin her buildup by changing her name, she balked. Always thinking of her family, she told the studio that her name was an established show business entity. (Blondell said Warners wanted to change her name to "hold everything—Inez Holmes.") Knowing they were dealing with a professional who'd been around, Warners gave her some latitude.

Blondell's statements about her roles and her attitude are in sharp contrast to Gail Russell's. "I just sailed through things, took

the scripts I was given, did what I was told. I couldn't afford to go on suspension. I was what they called a studio dame ... I just showed my big boobs and tiny waist and acted glib and flirty. I was the fizz on the soda." In Hollywood, that was enough to earn her stardom. Blondell was a recognizable—and welcome—face in movies for more than five decades, and not once was she anything less than professional and utterly entertaining. Because Blondell saw stardom as simply a job, and she had never pushed herself as a glamour queen (or even as a Movie Star), she never faced the kinds of problems that many other aging beauties of her era faced. Blondell endured. Even when she became heavy and, frankly, older, there were good roles for her because she was willing to be dropped to the supporting player level.* The zesty, smart-talking babes she had played in her prime became zesty, smart-talking older babes. She was still the fizz on the soda. Hers was a movie stardom to envy.



Two actresses whose response to the demands of the system were totally opposite ... Gail Russell was destroyed by it, but Joan Blondell never let it get her down.

Blondell and Russell are the yin and yang of star stories, with more people on the Blondell side. However, given the control over their lives the studios exercised and the hard work involved, it was inevitable that some successful movie stars would do more than gripe behind the scenes. Some began to fight with their studios. For the most part, these quarrels weren't trivial complaints about wanting a larger dressing room; they were serious fights over being assigned movies without any choice in the matter. Some of these studio assignments were, in fact, horrible. If anyone doubts that even the very top movie stars had to do what they were told back then, take a look at the career of Bette Davis. In late 1941 and early 1942, she was a two-time Oscar winner at her peak, one of the biggest names in town. During this period, she played two of what many feel are her greatest roles—that of the unfaithful wife Leslie in *The Letter* (1940) and the sensitive Aunt Charlotte of *Now, Voyager* (1942). In both films, Davis is every inch the confident actress as well as the consummate movie star, and it would seem logical that Warner Bros., her home studio, would respect her and cast her only in other good roles. At the very least, one would assume the studio wouldn't want to cast her in dreck. Yet in this same time frame, Davis had to play an almost demeaning (and thoroughly unsuitable) role as the secretary in *The Man Who Came to Dinner* (1941), a part that could have been played by anyone and in which she badly misfired. Even more hideous was her part in *The Bride Came C.O.D.* (1941), an alleged comedy in which she's an heiress kidnapped by aviator James Cagney. It's a dismal farce that even these two giants can't lift off the ground. The sight of Bette Davis parachuting out of an airplane in a fur-trimmed coat and high heels—and landing in a cactus—shows why she fought the Brothers Warner. Davis said, "I could be forced to do anything the studio told me to do. They could even ask for a contract player to appear in a burlesque house. The only recourse was to refuse, and then you were suspended without pay. When you were under suspension from your contract, with no salary, you couldn't even work in a five-and-dime store. You could only starve, which of necessity often made you give in to the demands of the studio."*

Davis wasn't alone in having to jump into cacti, as it were. When MGM wanted to make a movie to feature the famous ice-skating show Shipstad & Johnson's, they came up with a doozy called *The Ice Follies of 1939*—and put top stars Joan Crawford and Jimmy Stewart in it. The two are an odd matchup to begin with, but the sight of them smiling grimly and teetering around on ice skates is a real showstopper, though not the kind intended. All the top stars fully understood the situation they were in, whether they complained openly about it or not. Clark Gable said, "I am paid not to think ... and to be obedient."

Supporting players were also subjected to varying assignments that could include both the top movies of the day as well as garbage. A case in point is Anne Revere, who, until she was blacklisted in the late 1940s, was practically *de rigueur* as the serious older woman actress whose presence signaled a prestige movie. She had a distinctive voice, serious talent, and a big, plain face that spoke of simple proletarian values—presumably because she didn't wear lipstick.[†] She appeared in such award-winning movies as *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), *The Keys of the Kingdom* (1944), *The Song of Bernadette*, and *A Place in the Sun* (1951). She won the Academy Award as Best Supporting Actress in 1944 for her role as Elizabeth Taylor's mother in *National Velvet*. And yet that very same year, she was cast as the queen of a South Seas island in *Rainbow Island* (1944), a Paramount musical comedy starring Dorothy Lamour. Revere is photographed standing around in a sarong, wearing lotus blossoms in her hair, and yards of bangles on her arms. She strides through the jungle carrying a decorative spear and delivering such lines as, "Bring them to the temple of Moh-Moh." In fact, during the years she was appearing in the aforementioned prestige pictures, she also was cast in *Star Spangled Rhythm* (1942), *Standing Room Only* (1944), *Carnival in Costa Rica* (1947), and *The Shocking Miss Pilgrim* (1947).



James Cagney and Bette Davis were two of the biggest stars to fight their home studio (Warner Bros.) for their freedom, and here is one of the reasons: Davis lands in a cactus and Cagney has to pretend he cares in *The Bride Came C.O.D.*

It's surprising in retrospect that more movie stars *didn't* make some sort of official fight against the studios at that time. Although many complained privately about the long hours, pressure, and hard work, most chose not to make a public fight. The studios were vindictive, and although in competition with one another for the box office dollar, they pulled together when a star got uppity. The real battles were fought by Davis, James Cagney, and Olivia de Havilland. Significantly, all were under contract to Warner Bros., a studio famous for its cheap and controlling atmosphere. (Cagney said, "If you could survive seven years at Warner Bros., you could conquer the world.") Cagney sued Warners in 1936 over breach of contract and won, walking out on the studio. He re-signed with Warners in 1938, but for two years he left them in the dust. Also in 1936, Davis, angry at her silly roles, tried to break the hold the

studio had on her by traveling to England to make movies outside of studio control. Davis lost her fight, but Olivia de Havilland did not.*

De Havilland was stuck in movie after movie between 1935 and 1943 until she challenged the system on behalf of all her fellow movie actors. As her seven-year Warner Bros. contract expired, she prepared to leave the studio but was told that, having taken a suspension for refusing a role, she had incurred the standard additional six-month penalty. According to the studio, this beautiful young actress, who had faithfully labored on their behalf and enhanced many weak movies for them, now owed them an additional six months of bondage. De Havilland sued, and unlike Davis, was not overcome by the process. She won her case. This legal act, now known as the De Havilland Decision, had a positive effect on the profession that still stands today.

The studios themselves saw no problem with what they were doing. They were turning nobodies into somebodies, and they were spending a great deal of time, energy, and money to do it. They were taking all the financial risks, and it was their experience and understanding that could transform an unknown into a star. They had used the star machine to create a successful product. The product only needed to accept that simple fact and do what it was told. And the studios could get tough. Louis B. Mayer was said to have always been patient if he believed in a property. On the other hand, he could let a difficult star have it. He was alleged to have shouted at Luise Rainer, who often faked fainting in an attempt to get her way, “Luise, we’ve made you and we’re going to *kill* you!”† And when Mickey Rooney (in his Andy Hardy prime) wanted to marry Ava Gardner, he shouted, “How dare you destroy the studio’s best investment! It’s not your life, not as long as you’re working for me. MGM has made your life.” (Rooney was often the brunt of mogul rage. When he broke his leg on the set of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in 1935, Jack Warner, according to Rooney, “went insane” and said he was going to kill him and then “after I kill him, I’m gonna break his other leg.”) When Clark Gable, MGM’s most popular and famous leading man, asked for a percentage of the

profits from his films, he was flatly refused. A top executive was reported to have said, “He’s nobody. We took him from nobody. We lavished him with lessons and publicity, and now he’s the most desired man in the world. Who taught him how to walk? We straightened his teeth and capped them into that smile ... We taught this dumb cluck how to depict great emotions. And now he wants a piece of the action? Never!”^{*} Commenting on any star who wanted to have more control, Nicholas Schenck, president of the Loews-MGM empire, ruthlessly said, “Did they finance the production? Did they take the risk if there is a loss? Did they concern themselves with the huge overhead of the studio? Did they develop the Metro trademark?”

It was ironic that behind the scenes, seemingly powerful movie stars were not in a position to make any decisions about how they were cast or used. As Alexander Walker wrote in *Stardom: The Hollywood Phenomenon*, “The star system ... gradually took on the reality, if not the appearance, of a star serfdom. Glamour was its camouflage and fame its dazzling illusion. Behind the grandeur of being a movie star in those years lay all the gradations of servitude ... The movie actor, like the sacred king of primitive tribes, is a god in captivity.” The public didn’t realize that stars were front men and women, faces to be sold, talents to be exploited. A star’s only power lay outside the system, in the minds of the public and in the fans’ response to their images. Being a movie star was not a glorification. It was a job. What’s more, the business saw it as a machine-made job. Their “labor force” of movie stars fought their little human battles, but the studios almost always won during the heyday of the Hollywood star system.

^{*} The “seven ages” of star product have comically been defined as (using a modern standard): “Who is Ben Affleck?” “Get me Ben Affleck!” “Get me a young Ben Affleck!” “Who is Ben Affleck?” (The fact that there are four, not seven, is what can be called “Hollywood math.”) Actually, the only one that truly mattered in the old system was “Get me Ben Affleck!” If no one knew who he was, or if his time had passed, no one would bother to ask about him.

* There were always exceptions. Greta Garbo negotiated a contract that allowed her approval of her cameraman, director, co-stars, and scripts. But how many Garbos were there in the sound era? Although the great stars of the silent era—Fairbanks, Chaplin, Pickford, et al.—could own their own production companies and make such choices for themselves, that was not how the business worked in the sound era. Not all movie stars submitted to the studio contract, of course. Once established, some became freelancers. However, their long working day remained the same because most movies were made by the studios. The most typical “star story” involves the machine and the seven-year contract.

* And that was the norm, not the exception. Betty Hutton described her working day for the costume musical *Incendiary Blonde* (1945): “I’d get to the studio at six a.m. To have my hair dressed in period styles. I’d stay until nine or ten p.m. To have fittings for my period clothes. I’d give up lunches to rehearse new songs, and I’d work every single Sunday on dance routines. The picture was shooting for four months ... I began to crack and if anyone looked at me, I cried.”

† One of the reasons Marilyn Monroe received so much negative publicity for her unreliability was that it was anathema to the profession. After the studio system collapsed, the cost efficiency of the business was lost and stars, directors, co-stars, even the ever-reliable cinematographers began to be late sometimes. Nevertheless, punctuality remains the key to the film business.

‡ Ironically, these shoots included posing for photos that showed them cheerfully sitting around the sets, allegedly just having a good old time.

* Stars found the sorts of hobbies they could pick up and lay down at a moment’s notice. Joan Crawford knitted. John Barrymore and Gary Cooper painted. Henry Wilcoxon carved small boats. Errol Flynn picked up and laid down in his own special way.

* The same thing was done in the case of *The Crow* (1994). Leading man Brandon Lee, the son of Bruce Lee, died when he was accidentally shot during filming. But he had finished most of his scenes, so the studio completed the movie and released it as a tribute to the fallen actor.

† This response continues today. Madonna said about stardom, “If I had known what it was going to be like, I wouldn’t have tried so hard.”

* She received a Best Supporting Actress nomination for *The Blue Veil* in 1951.

* Not everyone agreed with Davis’s portrait of herself as a dominated little actress. John Huston described her during their 1942 film together, *In This Our Life*: “There is something

elemental about Bette, a demon within her which threatens to break out and eat everybody, beginning with their ears. The studio was afraid of her.”

† She *could* be gussied up, as in her role as a rich man’s wife in *Carnival in Costa Rica*.

* The formation of the Screen Actors Guild in 1933 was the first organized rebellion. See Tino Balio for full details on the Guild, as well as the fights staged by Cagney, Davis, and de Havilland. Some actors were smart enough to avoid being put under long-term contract by any single studio after their initial development periods, among them Cary Grant, a shrewd businessman.

† Scott Eyman’s highly readable book on Mayer also reported that Mayer, having built up the star Ricardo Montalban, once asked him for a favor and was upset when Montalban hesitated. “Listen, Ricardo,” he’s reported to have snapped. “If I can’t ask you for a favor when I need a favor, when *can* I ask you for a favor?”

* In March 1954, Gable left MGM, his home studio, with a dignified statement for the press, saying he wanted to freelance and thanking everyone he had worked with. Behind the scenes, he said, “You know, those bastards in the front office didn’t even give me a farewell party or anything. They didn’t even bother to say good-bye.” Alice Faye had a similar send-off, remarking that her home studio, 20th Century–Fox, also gave her nothing —“Not even a pickle dish.”

DISILLUSIONMENT: TYRONE POWER



Tyrone Power

A legendary movie star is a legendary movie star. People like Joan Crawford are mythic, and time has endorsed her transcendence over the machine. Yet stars like Crawford and other so-called legends were themselves once part of that very machine. They've just turned out to be greater than the sum of its parts. There are, however, movie stars—famous movie stars—whose careers illustrate what the machine could do and what it couldn't do. Their stories are the real definition of the system. They prove it and deny it simultaneously. Sometimes the star machine appeared to have been designed by Rube Goldberg, as one day it worked and the next day it didn't. Some stars began to challenge it or suffer career limitations because of it, stars like Tyrone Power.

Power was beautiful. Not handsome. Beautiful. Solid, substantial, and with great masculine dignity, but with the kind of physical looks that can only be labeled "beautiful." In his prime, his looks were awesome. In the 1940 film *Brigham Young*, Power is lying on a small bed, his head touching a curtain that barely separates him from the luscious young Linda Darnell lying in a separate bed on the other side of the curtain. It is night. They are unwed but sleeping together in a cabin, with only the curtain keeping them apart. (To make this acceptable to censors, there are also small children nearby, wide awake and watchful.) Power's skin shines. His eyes glow. His eyelashes are thick. His teeth are white and straight. As beautiful as Darnell is, and she was one of the great beauties of her era, she is not as beautiful as Power. Furthermore, the Hollywood system knows *he's* the money shot. He is presented in the "leaning-back-against-the-pillow" pose usually reserved for the leading woman. Darnell gets hers, but the camera lingers over Power. In a series of close-ups, each shot becomes tighter on his face until finally the viewer is right on top of him and can really see him. Tyrone Power was beautiful.* No one ever received this kind of

treatment more than the stunning Tyrone Power. He was the ultimate male sex symbol of his day.

The career development of Tyrone Power illustrates how limiting the star machine process could become and how a great star could be both an asset and a problem. On the one hand, he was made into one of the most glamorous and successful movie stars of the studio era, a top-ranked box office bonanza with hordes of adoring fans, both male and female. He became the epitome of 1930s glamour for men. On the other hand, being made into a glamour boy stifled him. The machine process glorified him and then stunted him. He was shaped easily and efficiently into his type, and fit it so well that he couldn't become the serious actor he wanted to be. Tyrone Power is never listed among the Cagneys, Gables, Stewarts, Grants, Coopers of his own era, because the star machine made him too well. Just as he was a perfect product, he could never be more than a perfect product. He couldn't be a legend. He could only be beautiful.

...

TYRONE POWER DID NOT NEED the usual detailed star preparation the studio machine provided. He came from a distinguished acting family, and he had significant stage experience. Furthermore, no one who set eyes on him imagined that he would ever be anything *but* a movie star. With his looks, his future in Hollywood was guaranteed. As a result, his climb to stardom was brief, and the machinery was used only to polish his beauty and construct his image, cleverly directing him forward following the signals the fans sent the studio.

The first Tyrone Power was a popular Irish actor. His grandson, who dramatically billed himself as Tyrone Power the Second, was the father of the movie star we know as Tyrone Power. Ty's father, born Frederick Tyrone Power (1869–1931), was a successful theatre star, a matinee idol with a strong voice and the good looks he passed on to his son. He was known as a man who could play in any type of melodrama without losing his dignity, something else he apparently passed on. Power's father played opposite the grandes dames of his day—Mrs. Leslie Carter, Julia Marlowe, and the

famous Mrs. Fiske. His son, named Tyrone Edmund Power III, was born on May 5, 1914, to an Indiana girl who had changed her name to Patia Power and willingly embarked on the touring theatrical life alongside her husband. The Powers were a serious theatrical couple who worked steadily at their craft, although their marriage fell apart while Power was still a youngster. Ty Power continued in his family's tradition, making his theatrical debut at age seven in a road company version of *La Golondrina*, with his mother playing the lead.

Tyrone Power's father appeared in movies as well as plays. When his teenaged son came out to Hollywood for a family visit, he was naturally invited onto his father's set. The movie was the 1931 talking version of *The Miracle Man*, and as legend has it, on December 20, 1930, Power's father collapsed while filming and died in his son's arms. If this is true, the traumatic event would have taken place when Power was about seventeen years old. Whatever the exact order of events, the elder Power *did* die while making *Miracle Man*, and his son *was* in Hollywood, virtually penniless and trying to break into movies himself. Power stayed on after his father's death and obtained one small bit part in *Tom Brown of Culver* in 1932, billed at the very bottom of the credits. Discouraged, he returned east to the theatre, learning his craft by touring in summer stock with the famous Katharine Cornell. A worthwhile theatre career seemed to elude him, however. Feeling lost and rootless, he went back where everyone told him his looks should take him—to Hollywood, in late 1934. Shortly afterward, he got a one-day bit part, playing a West Point cadet in Warners' *Flirtation Walk*, a musical starring Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler.

Power made two screen tests in mid-1935, both for the newly formed 20th Century-Fox, but was again losing heart when he was suddenly called by the studio head, Darryl Zanuck. Zanuck's wife had seen one of the tests and said, "Shave his eyebrows and he'll be a star." (This seems to have been the full extent of his "star assessment.") Zanuck listened to his wife and cast Power as Count Valais in *Girls' Dormitory*, an early-1936 release. Near the end of the movie, a handsome young man suddenly appears and asks the leading lady, Simone Simon, "Could I have this dance?" He could,

audiences thought. He definitely could. Power had only one close-up, but it allowed viewers to see clearly an extraordinarily good-looking young man. Preview cards immediately told the studio what they needed to know. Audiences noticed the guy in the tuxedo, the one who wanted a dance, what was his name? And when would they see him again?

That was all it took for Tyrone Power Jr., as he was first billed. With only a tuxedo, a royal name, one line of dialogue, shaved eyebrows, and his eyelashes, he bought himself a chance to become a movie star. He was more than ready. Though young, he had paid his dues in road companies and summer stock. (He had also been active in community theatre after arriving in L.A. at the Pasadena Playhouse.) Ironically, none of that actually mattered to his home studio, 20th Century-Fox. All they needed to know was that he was beautiful and that the fans had picked him out all by themselves.

Thus, it was that Tyrone Power Jr. was pulled out of the male lineup and put under development for the most important role of his life, that of “movie star.” “Put as much time in as you need on this boy,” said Zanuck to his star machine personnel. To be sure he wasn’t a fluke, Fox rushed him into a larger role, but not the lead, in *Ladies in Love* (also 1936). To be safe, he would again play a “count” and wear a tuxedo. He would be billed seventh, as Tyrone Power Jr. (the last time the “Jr.” would appear after his name). He would be featured with four high-powered females: Loretta Young, Constance Bennett, Janet Gaynor, and Simone Simon. Since *Ladies in Love* is a traditional women’s picture about how women just have to suffer at the hands of men, it was a safe place to dangle Power in front of potential fans. It was the last time he would ever appear in the movies as anything less than a star.

Power appears in only five short scenes in *Ladies in Love*. He is first seen through an open door, a composition designed specifically to both frame him and isolate him. The audience is asked to focus on him—and they do. In the story line, the person opening the door to him is Loretta Young, already every inch a star. Her double-take reaction is meant to coordinate with the audience’s: Wow! What a gorgeous guy! In the brief scene that follows, Power is given four

close-ups. The sequence runs for only thirty-eight seconds, and Young, Bennett, and Paul Lukas are all present. But Power, new to films, is the performer singled out by the cutting, the composition, and the camera.

This is the star machine at work. Power hardly appears in the movie, but he is set up, featured, and *shown* to the audience as important because he has been targeted behind the scenes for future fame. When he dumps Young to marry a girl of his own aristocratic class, he becomes the living definition of a great romantic loss. Since *his* character breaks *her* heart—causing her to bungle a suicide attempt and nearly kill Gaynor instead—*he* is what makes her character believable. If Power's brief scenes don't convince the audience that he's the kind of guy women are willing to die for, Young's character doesn't work. It was a big test for Tyrone Power. Was the audience response to him in *Girls' Dormitory* a fluke? It was not. He delivered. The role of Count Valais in *Ladies in Love* proved his star appeal.

As head of the studio, Darryl F. Zanuck was a man with a shrewd nose for both story and star power. He kept track of the dailies on *Ladies in Love*, checking on Power's progress. What Zanuck saw made him immediately move Tyrone Power up the ranks. He cast him as the male lead in a big-budget costume drama to be called *Lloyd's of London* (1936). (The star machine might have its step-by-step process, but plans could always be scrapped or speeded up when a Ty Power came along.) Power appeared opposite the ethereally beautiful blonde Madeleine Carroll, a popular movie personality who is barely known today. (She was taking over the female starring role after Loretta Young objected to playing it because it was "too small.") Power's part had originally been planned for Don Ameche, but when Young was reassigned, so was he. Power stepped in, and as the film's leading man, unofficially became a star. Because he was new and untried, however, Fox cautiously billed him fourth.

Lloyd's of London gives Power a dramatic entrance. His character (played as a poor child by Freddie Bartholomew) has been arrested on Peeping Tom charges, which gets the audience's attention. When

the camera pans over to him, the “star” Tyrone Power is dressed in full eighteenth-century costume, looking thin-faced, a bit callow, and slightly underfed. Yet as he is seen in medium close-up, he is distinctive and handsome. Although he looks extremely young, he has presence in the frame. Films are seldom shot in sequence, but Power’s development in the film almost seems to be chronological. At first, he’s a bit overdone, with carefully tamed eyebrows, a too-white complexion, and lipsticky lips. As the story progresses he begins to look more natural, less primped for principal photography. He has the typical small stature of the male movie star and the usual large head. Later in his life, his body seemed to grow fuller, more solid, and his torso had better balance, but here he is almost a boy. However, we see the gift of his theatrical ancestors: a confident star presence, an easy way with dialogue, and solid performance technique. His deep, masculine voice is a key element,* giving him a sense of strength and maturity. He comfortably wears an array of different costumes, from sailor’s rags to priest’s disguise to brocaded pants. He is comfortable with props like pistols and swords, dances with elegance and grace, and in romantic close-ups is more than anyone could hope for.

Tyrone Power’s “debut” film gave him a showcase role. Zanuck and Fox surrounded him with everything he might need—superb production values, a strong story, and an excellent supporting cast, including, besides the radiant Carroll, George Sanders as the villain and Sir Guy Standing, C. Aubrey Smith, and Virginia Field in support, all directed by the veteran Henry King. Power’s role even includes a deathbed scene. His beautiful head is lying on a stark white pillow, his thick lashes stuck to his cheeks, a wan smile on his face. An intense close-up lets the audience ogle him as he “remembers” a happy childhood, images of which are superimposed over his face as he—and the movie—slowly fade out.

In early December 1936, Zanuck released *Lloyd’s*, sat back, and waited. Within days it was apparent that Power would be not only a star, but a star of the highest magnitude. He was a hit, or as *Variety* sagely pointed out, “The women ought to go for him in a big way.” Zanuck called in his publicity department, and the star machine

really started to roll with the usual bios, photos, and plants. (Because his name was already famous, and because he refused to change it, only his “Jr.” was eliminated.)

In 1937, Tyrone Power would star in five feature films at 20th Century–Fox.* That was how quickly a studio could manufacture movies and roles tailored for a hot property. (From *Girls’ Dormitory* in 1936 through 1943, when he entered military service, Power would make twenty-five features, all of them hits: three in 1936, five in 1937, three in 1938, four in 1939, four in 1940, two in 1941, three in 1942, and one in 1943.)

Everyone already knew that Tyrone Power would be easy to sell and easy to cast. (He wasn’t going to be asked to play Hamlet.) Nevertheless, the studio formed a specific plan to expand his initial popularity, with special care given to his first full year—1937. Four of his films were to be simple little comedies that could be quickly and cheaply made, to keep his face on the screen and in the fan magazines. The fifth was planned as something exceptional—a big-budget costume film, *In Old Chicago*.

The studio’s plan included pairing Power with suitable female co-stars. Studio heads knew they might have a problem anytime the leading man was more beautiful than the leading lady, and studios weren’t investing in female stars for *that* to happen if they could prevent it. As was the usual business practice of the times, Fox cast Power in service to its current best-established female box office draws: Loretta Young, Sonja Henie, and Alice Faye.* Three of his 1937 movies paired him with the exquisitely beautiful Young: *Love Is News*, *Cafe Metropole*, and *Second Honeymoon*. Young had been his first romantic lead, in *Ladies in Love*. (The public loved them together, and they would go on to co-star in a fourth feature, *Suez*, in 1938.) Throughout 1937, Fox shrewdly cast Power as the type they felt the public wanted him to be. Although in one movie he was a hardworking reporter, in the other three he was a bogus prince, a real prince, and a rich though unroyal Prince Charming. These efficient romantic comedies required Power to look good, wear clothes well, make love effectively, and be a little funny. No

more, no less. *Love Is News*, *Cafe Metropole*, *Thin Ice*, and *Second Honeymoon* all jumble together in retrospect, except that in *Thin Ice*, the leading lady ice-skates—and Power stands around while she does it.



Tyrone Power and Loretta Young at the peak of their youth and beauty in *Cafe Metropole*, a charming comedy that required equally charming co-stars.



Playing the lead in *Jesse James*, Power ascended to the title of King of Hollywood, eclipsing his co-star, Nancy Kelly.

For someone like Power, who everyone knows has arrived, this is a typical Hollywood year of star development. He appeared in as many films as possible while Fox nailed down what they confidently felt would be his type: rich, royal, and romantic. The best of his light 1937 ventures is *Cafe Metropole*. It's genuinely funny and charming, with a pseudo-Lubitsch touch. Set in Paris, it opens up on a very drunk young Power exclaiming, "I want a roasted eagle!" and from then on never leaves him except when it's switching its close-up focus to his beautiful counterpart, Loretta Young. She wears feathers and diamonds, very good hats and suits, and a spectacular white lace mantilla. Power, a spoiled and irresponsible young Princeton grad forced to pretend he's a Russian count, is mostly clad in a tuxedo, white tie, and tails, but no matter what he wears, he looks astonishing. Since his Russian accent is supposed to slip deliberately from time to time, Power has no trouble with it. The movie makes no bones about what it is selling the public—it consists largely of tight close-ups of Power and Young, both together

and alone in the frame. And it knows what it has in Power. Instead of a scene in which the leading lady models her wardrobe, Young takes Power to a hat shop and *he* tries on hats, so viewers have plenty of time to stare at him. The romantic plot complications are easily solved, and a few good lines are tossed around. When Young's father (Charles Winninger) complains that his daughter has fallen for a bogus prince, his sister (Helen Westley) reminds him that he himself had once fallen in love "with the second baseman on a Bloomer Girls baseball team." ("Well," he responds, "at least she wasn't a second baseman posing as a right fielder.") And when the father tells Young the bad news about her "Russian" boyfriend, she shrugs it off, saying, well, of course, she had known it all along. "Don't you think I've been out with enough Princeton men to recognize one when I see him?" she asks.

Audiences could enjoy any of Power's first movies. They were handsomely decorated, well cast in supporting roles, and they put Power alongside a beautiful woman. What was not to like? Yet there was something slightly negative about Power's presence. Even at the beginning of his career, Power could suggest the larcenous qualities a *very* handsome young man might develop. In *Ladies in Love*, he romances Young but ditches her without a guilty conscience. In *Love Is News*, he's a ruthless reporter, and in *Cafe Metropole*, a gambler who has squandered all his inheritance. In *Second Honeymoon* he toys with his ex-wife, spoiling her new marriage without a shred of guilt. What Power could do—and his studio noted it—was bring out of himself the qualities of a spoiled brat. It was totally believable that a man who looked like Power *could* be a spoiled brat, of course, even a cad. It's the same quality that the young Elizabeth Taylor, to some effect a female look-alike for Power, would present on screen a decade later. Audiences could easily believe that such gorgeous creatures would have learned early in life that they really weren't going to have to work hard to get their way.

For Power's final movie of 1937, Fox went all out. The response to everything he had done that year had been superb, and Power was now the studio's male star with the most unlimited potential. He was young, gorgeous, popular, and best of all, genuinely

talented, with a strong understanding of professional discipline. Fox felt its investment was secure, so Darryl F. Zanuck featured Power in three costume movies replete with decorative settings and exciting historical contexts. These would give the public a Power whom Fox knew they had already liked, and give Fox a chance at blockbuster returns. Power's last 1937 movie was scheduled to be *In Old Chicago*, set during the Chicago fire of 1871. Following that, he would make 1938's *Alexander's Ragtime Band* (which would start in 1911 and move forward to modern times) and *Suez*, about the building of the canal.

For *In Old Chicago*, Zanuck and Fox would blow the budget on a twenty-minute climax in which "old Chicago" would, indeed, burn down. (The fire cost \$150,000 to stage.) They would put the popular singer Alice Faye in the female lead, making the movie a sort of musical historical epic. They would cast their other popular dark-haired leading man, Don Ameche, himself an up-and-coming name, as a foil to Power. (Ameche and Power were to play brothers.) They would surround everyone with a terrific supporting cast (Andy Devine, Alice Brady, Phyllis Brooks, Brian Donlevy, and others). Best of all, they would make the sexy, amazingly beautiful Tyrone Power into a complete bad guy, picking up on the menace and danger that lurked beneath his elegant appearance. Power's character gambled, owned a saloon, wooed Faye, and became a crooked politician who used his wife as a decoy to hide his cheap tricks. This was the real beginning of making Power into something more than a pretty boy, run-of-the-mill junior heartthrob, of shading his general category of "male sex symbol" into a more specific type. (As *Variety* succinctly put it, "Casting of Power as a heavy is contrary to what most of his fans might expect.")

His next movie, one of his most successful of the period, was *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, co-starring him again with Don Ameche and Alice Faye in an attempt to repeat the success of *In Old Chicago*. The movie would be Power's first musical, and it was inevitable that Fox, a studio that developed beautiful blond female stars for the genre, would think of him as the perfect dark-haired male co-star even though he neither sang nor danced.* Power plays a wealthy

Nob Hill snob who becomes the leader of a jazz band and behaves selfishly, losing the love of his life (Alice Faye) until he learns his lesson. Power's credibility as someone who was too ambitious, too spoiled, too selfish, was put to full use, even though the plot has him shape up in the end. The movie incorporated a passel of Irving Berlin tunes and threw in Ethel Merman (slim and perky and singing her lungs out), Jack Haley, John Carradine, Jean Hersholt, and Helen Westley. The result was magical, and the film still holds up today as one of the liveliest musicals of the period. It received Oscar nominations for Best Picture, Best Score, Best Song ("Now It Can Be Told"), Best Art/Set Decoration, and Best Film Editing. (Only music director Alfred Newman won.) What fans loved most in *Ragtime* was the love scene in which Faye sings "Now It Can Be Told" while Power conducts his band. She looks longingly at him, singing directly to him in close-up. The movie cuts back and forth from Faye to Power to show him slowly responding and smoldering back at her. (These cuts were said to bring out squeals of delight from females in the audience.) Across the performance of a musical number, Faye and Power conducted a hot exchange without touching each other. The box office soared.

While Fox counted its money and congratulated itself on putting Power under contract, negotiations were under way with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to loan him out for the only time in his career at Fox. The movie was a fourth costume film, the sumptuous historical drama *Marie Antoinette* (1938), a starring vehicle for the First Lady of MGM, Norma Shearer, who was going to be coiffed and gowned and jeweled to a fare-thee-well. Shearer, the wife of MGM's head of production, Irving Thalberg, had not been in a movie for the nearly two years that followed his death. *Marie Antoinette* had been in the planning stages before Thalberg died, and huge sums had already been expended to make the movie the lavish tribute to Shearer that Thalberg had wanted it to be. Although he was said to regret it later, Zanuck agreed to loan Power out to play the role of Count Axel de Fersen, the man alleged to have been the queen's Swedish lover.

Tyrone Power is billed *over* the title, to the right of Shearer's name. To have his name alongside hers, and over the title, meant that other powerful figures in Hollywood were endorsing Power's stardom. Power's loan-out to MGM indicated that the entire business saw him as having long-range potential, real drawing power, and the acting chops to guarantee him decades of roles. Since Power was not under contract to MGM, however, they used him to support *their* star. Power's presence in *Marie Antoinette* represents an aspect of stardom seldom discussed: As in *Ladies in Love*, Power is here to provide development of the leading lady's character. In movie terms, that a man this good-looking would love Marie Antoinette means she isn't a bad person. She's okay if she deserves Tyrone Power, since he represents the physical embodiment of what Shearer is entitled to as star, queen, and character. (There would be no bad smell clinging to Tyrone Power when he was supporting Norma Shearer in an MGM movie!)

The story is well under way before Power first appears, seen walking along a Paris street at night, accompanied by a minor player. Suddenly, from a balcony above a lavish residence, a beautiful woman appears. She is decked out in a powdered white wig, with diamond stars in her hair, a fan in her hand, and ruffles at her wrists. "Are you a Russian?" she calls. (She is in danger of forfeiting her diamond necklace—stones the size of hen's eggs—unless she can produce a Russian for the game she's playing.) Power inquires as to whether a Swede will do. He then enters the house and the domain of the soon-to-be queen of France. Shearer swirls down a curving staircase to greet him, her skirts wider than she is tall. He enters, gives his hat and coat to a flunky, and comes up the stairs toward her. They meet in profile halfway up, her star presence to what, it is suddenly clear, is *his* star presence. As Shearer greets him and really looks at him, she makes a small, startled movement backward and then says, "Oh! Why, you're perfect!" And indeed he is. Her remark is followed by a medium close-up of a calmly smiling Tyrone Power, a male actor absolutely ready for the A list.

Power returned to Fox to make *Suez* (1938), which had been rescheduled because of his loan-out. It would be his last movie with

Loretta Young. Again, he was in a costume film, playing a real person, Ferdinand de Lesseps, the man who built the Suez Canal. Called by *The New Yorker* “the most frankly inane of all the historical films” (a real challenge!), *Suez* featured Power wearing a head of curly black hair, Loretta Young wearing hoopskirts that reached to the edge of the frame, a wind machine blowing up a gigantic sandstorm, and both Disraeli and Louis Napoleon standing around. Despite critical scorn, it made a fortune. For Tyrone Power, it was personally significant. A young French actress named Annabella was cast as a devoted young girl who cannot make de Lesseps forget his lost love, the beautiful Loretta. Offscreen, Power and Annabella began dating, ultimately falling in love and marrying in April 1939.

The marriage was Power’s first conflict with the star machine and his first disappointment in the studio’s attitude toward him. The Fox publicity department had sold him to his fans as a romantic object. Unmarried. When news of his new bride hit, the studio immediately received a barrage of unfavorable mail. (One fan magazine said, “The producers’ groans could be heard from here to the Stork Club.”) Studio flacks had to go to work to resell Tyrone Power to keep him afloat as a sex object. (It didn’t help much that his new wife did not enjoy publicity, was French, was not particularly charismatic, and looked like a boy.)

Since there was nothing Fox could do about Power and Annabella, they set about shaping the way the fans should see their union. The fan magazines cooperated with the studio in a rapid retooling blitz on Power’s image. One article said, “There’s an unwritten law, or a general understanding, ... that in Hollywood a handsome young romantic actor loses his romantic appeal to his fans when he takes on a ‘little woman.’ It’s all right for tough guys like Jimmy Cagney, Pat O’Brien, and Humphrey Bogart to acquire brides, but for the dreamy boys with the melting eyes—no.” The article is actually a clever piece of manipulation. It suggests that the average, unkind, intolerant, not-too-bright fan might feel that way, but smart, devoted, attractive fans (like the one reading the article) would understand and keep on loving Power and going to his films.

The article claims that “a great deal of mail” was arriving from women (“between the ages of 14 to 40”) who are “apologizing for having written [Power] bitter letters after his marriage to Annabella.” By planting such carefully crafted articles, the studio took custody of the problem, told the readers to get over it, and hinted that Power wouldn’t love *them* anymore if they didn’t. They also collected “testimonies” from his leading ladies that Power was still the “most exciting guy on the screen.” “If the glamour girls who work with him week in and week out, under the most nerve-wracking and provoking conditions, still think he has romantic appeal after marriage, then he must have it, but good.” Linda Darnell, who was working with him in 1939’s *Day-Time Wife*, went the limit, saying, “I think he gained in romantic appeal when he married Annabella. Before his marriage, he was very brittle and harsh. He was very dashing, and he had great charm, but he was so restless! Now he has great depth, which he never had before.” Since a studio publicist undoubtedly wrote her quote, there’s a hint of how they really felt about the marriage—they were willing to punish Power in the middle of compliment.

Like most actors in the beginning, Tyrone Power had been happy to be cast, and having been cast, was even happier to assume the lead, and having assumed the lead, was happy to become a movie star—a well-paid movie star, a movie star with an overwhelmingly positive response from the fans. It had all seemed so joyous, so satisfying. Suddenly his marriage to the woman he loved had provoked negative responses from both his studio, the people he thought had his best interests in mind, and from his fans, the people he thought loved him for who he was. He was shocked. Friends marked his marriage as the moment in which Tyrone Power began to think about exactly what it might mean to have become a hot movie star property. Privately he complained bitterly about the studio’s attitude toward his marriage and refused to consider that it might affect his status with fans. Publicly, he began to draw somewhat back into himself but passively accepted his situation.

After *Suez* and despite Annabella and his first clash with studio rules, Power’s career continued to roll. So far, his movies had been

fairly uniform, and the studio planned to keep it that way. He had made only three kinds of movies: romantic comedies, costume dramas, and musicals, each of which had paired him with a big-name female co-star. For 1939, and possibly in response to fan mail regarding his marriage, Zanuck lined up five movies for Power, a heavy schedule. Two would be lighthearted romantic stories of the sort Power had done well with before—a sort of insurance policy on his career. One of those was *Second Fiddle* (1938), with Sonja Henie, a musical with Irving Berlin songs, fancy ice-skating “ballets,” and a cute story about a publicity hunt for the right girl to play the lead in an epic literary adaptation. This idea, inspired by the search for Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind*, was fun, and Power, as the fast-talking publicity chief, was charming. Since he and Henie had conducted a highly publicized love affair during 1936 and 1937, their pairing added spice to the story and helped offset the fans’ sense of Annabella’s permanency. The other comedy was the lackluster *Day-Time Wife*, Power’s last film of 1939, which used him to boost the career of newcomer Linda Darnell.

Power’s other three movies, however, were designed to explore shadings to his on-screen type. (Whatever might be said about Power’s career, its limitations, and his being locked into a studio contract, he *was* given careful handling by Zanuck, who looked for a variety of genres in which to star him.) First, Power was scheduled to appear in a western, a new departure for him, as Jesse James (1939). Then he would return to co-starring with Alice Faye in a musical (*Rose of Washington Square*), but in an edgy, more challenging role, and finally he would portray an Indian doctor in the prestigious literary adaptation of Louis Bromfield’s celebrated best seller *The Rains Came* (1939).

While *Jesse James* was shooting on location in Pineville, Missouri, in 1938,* Power hit a peak of popularity. The studio was monitoring his rise to fame closely, tracking fan mail, box office returns, reviews, the willingness of the non-studio media outside of Hollywood to promote the star, and any awards and honors earned (which existed for newcomers also). These categories are self-explanatory, but there was also one insider’s tool. In 1931, the

business magazine *Motion Picture Herald* began publishing the results of an annual poll of movie house exhibitors as to who they thought had been the top box office draws that year. These “top ten” lists were unscientific and today are considered highly suspect. Nonetheless, the lists were taken seriously and can still stand as a strong indication of who was popular with moviegoers and exhibitors.*

While Power was in Missouri, Fox received word that the motion picture exhibitors had voted him 1939’s “King of the Boxoffice.”† (His “Queen” was Jeanette MacDonald.) Much has been made of Clark Gable’s having been elected to the same title for the year 1938, but Power held it for three years in a row. His 1939 title was repeated in 1940 and 1941. Oddly, Gable, not Power, retained the title of king all his life. (Power was a prince, not a king.)

On the set of *Jesse James*, Power was clearly deferred to as the major star presence, despite the illustrious lineup of other actors. *He* plays the title role and is the *official* star. His supporting cast, in addition to Henry Fonda, includes Randolph Scott and, as the main villain, the stalwart Brian Donlevy, who could also carry a picture as leading man. Power for the first time was not paired with one of Fox’s great beauties or box office queens. His romantic leading lady was a lesser light, Nancy Kelly. Power’s real co-star, a sort of quasi-romantic lead, was Henry Fonda, playing Frank James. The two men are spectacular together, both at ease, both handsome and young, and both more than able to play their roles with full force.

Fonda and Power are in their prime—not one, but two beautiful leading men, both of whom are more photogenic than Nancy Kelly. Shot in Technicolor and on location outdoors in Missouri, *Jesse James* was a big box office hit. Power looks great as a train robber—his hat pulled low, a red bandanna across his face, with only his beautiful thick-lashed eyes showing. He is intense and stunning in his first color film. In the romantic scenes, there’s no question about who matters. When Nancy Kelly puts her head on Power’s shoulder or goes to embrace him, it is *his* face that is seen in profile, not hers,

and it is *his* face that takes the key light. With very few exceptions, in any scene in which he appears, the camera favors Tyrone Power.

The basic plot of *Jesse James*, which has excellent action sequences, is a domestic one. Despite the film's robberies and political background, the emphasis is on Jesse's love for his wife, Zee, and his desire to be a good husband and father. On the one hand, he's an angry, wild outlaw who, Fonda says, is "getting meaner every day." On the other, he's also the loving father and husband who finally says no to a return to the outlaw life. Fox was creating an ambiguous presence for Power, one that allowed him to be both bad and good, and that increased his box office appeal accordingly. This ambiguity made him popular with both men and women, as well as giving him a chance to play both a "male" action presence and a "female" romantic one. Fox began to look for roles that, consciously or unconsciously, allowed Power to further develop this ambiguity.

Now certain that Power's image had a touch of something malodorous, Fox was quick to recognize it as repressed sexuality, better known to them as *Really Big Box Office*. Power was not typecast as much as he was type-sexed. In his first years, Hollywood had him wear a tuxedo, lean against a pillar, lower his lids, and just let what happened to the audience happen. Then they started having him wear a tuxedo, lean against a pillar, lower his lids, and actively motivate the audience to ambivalent responses by having him play a character with a hidden subtext, a guy who was up to no good. The studio realized there was more than met the eye in Ty Power. Whatever it was, audiences liked it, but it still needed shaping. If a young man is perfect, who is going to identify with him? Sympathize with him? Since no one was ever more perfect than Power, the system found a way to neutralize his perfection. Build in a little imperfection. Make him too spoiled, too weak, too gullible, too bad, too something ... give him just a touch of the ugly that could put him within a fan's reach. None of this had anything to do with acting, of course.

In *Jesse James*, Power found box office gold playing an outlaw, confirming the studio's ideas about how to shade his type. Next, in

Rose of Washington Square, released in May 1939, Power played a cad based loosely on the gambler Nick Arnstein, who had married Fanny Brice (with Alice Faye in the Brice role). The movie was also obviously designed to cash in on *Ragtime*'s success, re-pairing Faye and Power and giving Faye several wonderful songs to sing, including Brice's famous "My Man." (Strong support comes from Al Jolson, in one of his last screen roles.) Power is comfortable playing his second outlaw in a row, as if he is relieved not to have to be a carelessly happy-go-lucky young prince or someone swanning around in breeches. He was beginning to hunger for the opportunity to play someone complex, with contradictory layers, a role he could get his teeth into. (Fanny Brice got her teeth into it, too. Recognizing her own life story, she sued 20th Century-Fox for defamation of character, invasion of privacy, and for using her life story without permission. The case was settled out of court.) Power was hopeful that his next film would give him a chance to really act.

The lavish *The Rains Came* was released in September. Power plays the role of Rama, an Indian doctor and scientist. Zanuck, now fully understanding what he had in Power, obviously presents him in the Valentino mode. The cinematography and lighting are stunning. Power, at the peak of his male beauty, is presented in a dazzling series of costume changes: stark white turbans that offset his darkened skin and black hair, white brocaded satins, white dinner jackets, a natty little military uniform, hospital whites, and, in a final outfit worthy of Valentino's *The Young Rajah* (1922), a gem-encrusted, ornately brocaded Indian outfit with a jeweled feathered headdress. Power looks exotic, unattainable, and well turbaned. Mostly he stands around in his outfits. (Zanuck apparently thought casting him as if he were Hedy Lamarr was a good idea.) To pair him with a female lead who was not girlish, Zanuck borrowed from MGM a star of proven sophistication to play the predatory Lady Esker, Myrna Loy. *The Rains Came* looks like a gender bender today, with Power in "dresses" and Loy the highly experienced "wolf" (like a Gable or Boyer) lusting after him. (When she first sees him, Lady Esker asks, "Who's the pale copper Apollo?"*) The story line is explicit about the attraction between the two. Loy is sexually

on the prowl, although Power is noble and dedicated to his work. (He is not innocent, however; that would have blown the sexual tension.) The movie, based on a literary success, gave Power prestige as an actor but maintained his sex symbol status and provided him with no real challenge. For instance, he arrives on-screen in an automobile. He gets out and walks to stand beside his male co-star, George Brent. A medium close-up shows them together, but Power is lit by the main light, and Brent is given a half shadow over his face. All focus is on the handsome Tyrone Power. George Brent is a very good-looking man, a sort of second-string Clark Gable, with a low voice and a command of screen space. Not much of an actor, Brent was nevertheless a strong male presence. But beside Power, he fades. Power was once again being used for his looks, even in a “prestige” movie. He was a passive object of desire.

As 1940 opened, 20th Century–Fox—with the help of America’s moviegoers—had found out Tyrone Power was a box office bonanza of the best kind: an all-purpose bad guy/good guy who could be dangerously sexy and still serve the generic needs of the studio system. He could be royal. He could be common. He could be noble. He could be naughty. He could be an honest citizen. He could be an outlaw. He could be hardworking and dedicated in the most righteous manner. He could be spoiled rotten. His characters could hurt women and still be sympathetic, or they could be themselves hurt and still look well dressed. He could look beyond extraordinary in top hat, white tie, and tails, but he could also look downright casual and relaxed in a brocaded period costume and powdered wig. He wore current fashions as if he were a male model, and he filled out a pair of tights as well as any male star ever had. Women swooned and wanted to be in his arms. Men swooned, too, and wanted to *be* him, taking women like Loretta Young and Linda Darnell in their arms. He touched all bases in all categories. He didn’t need specific typecasting as long as he looked good, was perfectly tailored, and his sex appeal was on display. He just had to be what he was: drop-dead gorgeous. This simple typing of Power as “male sex object” is different from the simple typing of a Dennis Morgan as “handsome leading man” for one main reason. Morgan’s

type was what he was. Power's type was how he was being used. Morgan's limitations were turned into an asset. Power's assets were turned into a limitation. His gifts worked against him.

Tyrone Power now faced a movie star dilemma. He was being used to fill in the blanks of all kinds of movies. He was "product." Any ambitions he had to be taken seriously, to get roles that challenged him were going to be difficult to fulfill. His career was sexualized—however subtly—in an androgynous manner. He would have to live with whatever limitations that imposed. Power started to complain privately around the time of *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, and by 1940 he was openly vocal about his disappointment. He began telling interviewers that he would like to give up Hollywood and return to the stage. No one, of course, paid much attention, especially 20th Century–Fox. Power, however, was paying attention. He couldn't overlook a sameness and a shallowness in everything he did. As Power's stardom progressed, he understood he was becoming a studio-defined "Tyrone Power"—an entity that had little to do with who he really was. This "Tyrone Power"—the one who excited the fans—was being shaped toward two main elements: a mildly villainous or outlaw quality and an ambiguous hidden sexuality. But his performance style refused to embrace either. He was often passive in the frame. Sometimes he seems to be a reluctant lover, restrained and unwilling. Other times, he allowed his sexuality to be displayed flamboyantly, and he offered it up as the camera sought it out. Unlike other top male stars—Gable, Cooper, Flynn—Power seemed to deny type. It's not easy to say something is a "Tyrone Power" role in the same way one can identify a "Gable" or a "Flynn." Power didn't cooperate with fan desires the way other actors did. Ironically, this made audiences like him even more. He held back; he seemed to be a mystery. He had everyone wondering—and wanting. His studio boldly exploited this quality.

Stars like Bogart, Flynn, and Robert Mitchum channeled their anger and embarrassment about stardom into a mocking acting style. Not Tyrone Power. Seen today, Power always seems to be detached from his movies. Only rarely is there any irony in his

performances (perhaps in *The Black Swan*, 1942, but it is a sincere kind of irony). As a result, much of what he might have accomplished was lost. Because he posed, let himself be decorated and draped, and became more of a sex object than his talent deserved, he was complicit in his own exploitation.

Outside the movies, Power's status as a sex object was pushed by the studio through fan magazine layouts. More portrait photos were taken of him than of any other male star, including fashion poses. In *The Mark of Zorro* (1940), his pants are so tight they upstage Linda Darnell, and in *The Black Swan* (his last genuinely entertaining movie before he entered military service), he is stretched out shirtless on a rack and tortured. No leading lady ever had *more* glamour close-ups than Tyrone Power.

Johnny Apollo (1940), an ordinary, low-budget movie, was designed to capitalize on Power's popularity.* It shows clearly how Fox used Power's looks and sex appeal to carry a weak vehicle. Right in the middle of a flimsy plot about how a rich young man turns into a bitter gangster (with a sultry Dorothy Lamour to help him), there's a perfect moment of exploitation. Wearing the obligatory tuxedo and smoking a cigarette, Power sits at a ringside table watching Lamour's nightclub performance. His eyes are heavy lidded and his lips are moist. He's casual, relaxed in his appreciation of her, but there's something coiled and waiting underneath. The camera just sits and watches him. He smokes and smolders. And that's mainly what he's there for—to be looked at, admired, and desired. Action stops while Power smokes and the audience fantasizes. They *want* that nice young man with the good manners and the good clothes who, when something went wrong and he was denied things, turned into a lawless gangster who's no better than anyone in the audience might want him to be. If they could just get their hands on him.

For his final release of the year, on November 1, 1940, Fox presented Power in a beautiful movie for all ages that has lasted *for* the ages, his version of *The Mark of Zorro*, co-starring him with Linda Darnell, well supported by Basil Rathbone, Gale Sondergaard, Eugene Pallette, J. Edward Bromberg, Montagu Love, and others.

Rouben Mamoulian directed with flair and panache, and the exquisite black-and-white photography presented Power as the ultimate in physical beauty. Seen today, the movie is fast-paced, charming, and stunningly shot and designed.



Tyrone Power in *The Mark of Zorro*, which showcased the two halves of his appeal: the dashing and dynamic swordsman ... and the pretty and sensuous clotheshorse.



Power is at his peak, and *The Mark of Zorro* presents clearly the star machine's fully designed and typed Tyrone Power. Pretending to be a foppish Don Diego, he is glamorous and effete, tasseled and ruffled. ("Here comes the California cockerel!") When he portrays the dashing Zorro, he is utterly macho, lean and mean, dressed in stark black, dueling and fighting and jumping on and off his horse. He is two Tyrone Powers, and one of them addresses directly the subject of Power's beauty and possible effeminacy. Don Diego swishes around in highly polished boots, carrying a fan, his hair all in curls, his costume a symphony of ribbons, brocade, and lace. He studies everyone through a lorgnette, letting his diamond ring catch the light, barely stifling a bored yawn, and sharing his feelings. "I was positively suffering from boredom," or, in hearing about Zorro, "Ooooh, politics, politics!" As Hollywood had done with Valentino before him, the business put Power's sexuality on the screen and let the chips fall wherever the audience chose.

In 1941, war was already raging in Europe, and events would soon change Power's personal life. He would make only six more films before leaving to enlist: *Blood and Sand*, a May 1941 release; *A Yank in the RAF*, in September 1941; *Son of Fury*, January 1942; *This Above All*, May 1942; *The Black Swan*, in October 1942; and *Crash Dive*, April 1943.

Son of Fury and *A Yank in the RAF* continued the Fox tradition of having their number-one leading man, Tyrone Power, play opposite their most beautiful and popular leading ladies. *Son of Fury* (co-starring Gene Tierney) was an adaptation of a popular adventure novel, *Benjamin Blake*. It is a period piece that puts him back in tights fighting a dastardly villain (George Sanders) and marooned in Tahiti wearing beads, lotus blossoms, and a sarong. *Yank* co-starred him with popular pinup queen Betty Grable. The movie was the first real World War II movie at Fox, even though America was not yet in the war. Neither of these movies, however entertaining audiences found them, provided Power with any challenge, but two other releases did. The first was *Blood and Sand*, a Technicolor remake of the Valentino silent, well directed by Rouben Mamoulian. The other was *This Above All*, an adaptation of a novel by Eric Knight that was the first real opportunity Power had to use his acting gifts in a part that did not rely solely on his good looks.

In *Blood and Sand*, Tyrone Power is beautiful, but so is everyone else. Even the supporting players—Anthony Quinn, Lynn Bari, and Power's two women, Linda Darnell and Rita Hayworth—are beautiful. In fact, everything in the movie is beautiful, lushly designed to reflect bullfighting posters and the colors of Spain. Even heavyweight Laird Cregar as a villainous critic and an aging Alla Nazimova as Power's mother look beautiful. By starring Power in a remake of one of Valentino's biggest hits, Fox officially announced Power as the heir to Valentino—to his female fans, to his sex appeal, to his androgyny, and to his reputation as *the* male star of his day.* The story has him change from a happy-go-lucky, lusty, energetic, and successful young bullfighter with everything in front of him into a disillusioned, debauched celebrity who is facing the collapse of his world and ultimate loss of his life. (It's a star's story.) As was by

now common, Power is seen repeatedly in close-ups and medium close-ups.

The novel *Blood and Sand* (by Blasco Ibañez) was stuffed full of significant questions regarding fame and fortune, religiosity, and sex and death in the afternoon via bullfighting. Fox kept the bullfighting, slid past the questions, weighed in heavily with the sex in the afternoon, and threw in a couple of deaths. *Blood and Sand*, like *Zorro*, puts two Tyrone Powers on screen. One is the aggressive, active bullfighter who slays *el toro* with courage and bravado. The other is the passive target for a nymphomaniacal woman of experience. In between, he tries to be a good husband and knows he's a failure. Power is part male, part female, part aggressive, part passive, part lusty figure of joy, part tragic figure of doom. He's available for any way you'd like to see him, the ultimate studio star business plan for him. And, as can never be said often enough, he's beautiful. He's presented for both men and women to admire. He wears lavish bullfighting costumes, tuxedos, and expensive suits. As he's being dressed by his assistant for a fight, he sits sprawled in a chair on a dais, leaning backward, his legs loose. While his stockings are slowly pulled on, he is surrounded by admiring men. Later he's seen naked from the waist up in bed when Darnell brings him his breakfast and cuddles with him. In his love scenes with the truly spectacular young Rita Hayworth, playing Doña Sol, a Gilda-before-she-was-Gilda kind of role, Power is passive, overwhelmed by her dominating sexuality. In one scene, she calls him as if he were a bull, stamping her foot and crying out, "Eh! Toro!" He comes submissively, bends her back in a hot kiss, only to see that his wife (Darnell) has unexpectedly arrived in the room. When Anthony Quinn, in a choice role as a rival, steals Hayworth from Power by taking her onto the dance floor to perform an acceptable form of public sex, Power is again passive, shattering a glass with his hand in glorious close-up, brooding, sulking, but still looking hot. *The Mark of Zorro* and *Blood and Sand* represent the most confident fulfillment of the popularity and beauty that Tyrone Power had first fully hit in 1939 with *Jesse James*. *Screenland* magazine called him "the hottest thing in Hollywood."



Before he left to serve his country in World War II, Power made two successful movies, *Blood and Sand* and *The Black Swan*.



This Above All was a more serious venture.* The novel on which it was based was a tremendous best seller—the story of a wartime romance. In the film Power plays an army hero from the lower classes who has become a deserter. His co-star, Joan Fontaine, plays an aristocratic young woman who has enlisted in the WAAFs. Power's character is confused, scornful of England, angry at the war and his role in it, and shattered by events. He is less than heroic, although of course still romantic, as he and Fontaine fall in love and work out their social differences against a background of war. For Power the film was serious work, a chance to be more than a pretty guy in tights. When you're watching *This Above All*, a somewhat treacly affair, the question inevitably arises: What if the war hadn't interrupted Power's career trajectory? Would this serious movie, in which he gives a tender and touching performance, have altered the direction of his career and freed him of being only a sex symbol? How Power's screen persona would have evolved if World War II

hadn't interrupted is not certain, particularly since his disillusionment with Hollywood had already blossomed.

Following *This Above All*, Power was immediately back behind a sword, facing off once again with George Sanders in a movie that became another big success. *The Black Swan* was Power's own version of the tongue-in-cheek "pirates of the Caribbean" movie.[†] Almost all pirate movies are playful, or mocking, to some degree. They have to find a way to make acceptable a hero who murders, rapes, and pillages—and they do it by treating it all as a big wink. By 1952 and Burt Lancaster's *The Crimson Pirate*, critics knew that the tradition was firmly in place, but it had been around since Douglas Fairbanks Sr. and certainly Power's *Black Swan* helped to put it there. The title card that follows the credits tells the audience that it is returning to "a time when villainy wore a sash ... and there was love, gold, and adventure." A male chorus is heard lustily singing "Heave ho! Heave ho! We never will fail, wherever we sail." Eventually, the audience gets to ogle Tyrone Power in pirate garb, barefooted and jolly. For an added bonus, he's often bare-chested. He's forced to climb into a hammock with Maureen O'Hara, to pretend they're married and save her life. (So much for the old idea that Hollywood insisted on "one foot on the floor" in bedroom scenes. O'Hara's in a sheer nightie, he's bare-chested, and they're squeezed up together in a small bed and definitely under the covers.) O'Hara later described Power as "murderously handsome."



Power lined up for his shots when he joined the U.S. Marines, including one by the photographer.

This return to Tyrone Power, adventurous sex symbol, was seriously curtailed by World War II. In December 1941, America entered the war, and on August 24, 1942, after negotiations with his studio, Tyrone Power enlisted as a private in the Marine Corps. His boss, Darryl F. Zanuck, had himself enlisted and was about to leave Hollywood. Before his departure, Zanuck planned Power's last movie before his fans would have to, in the parlance of the times, "accept the rationing" of Tyrone Power movies for the duration. (The duration turned out to be longer than anyone expected.) When *Crash Dive* was released in April 1943, it marked the last new Tyrone Power movie that would appear until November 1946.* (He reported for boot camp on January 2, 1943.)

More than three full years is a long time for any movie star to disappear, but in the star machine era it could be death. Yet Power accepted his military service willingly, volunteering to serve his country. By all accounts, he was an honorable man and genuinely

wanted to be part of the war effort without privilege or special consideration. Not for him was the typical movie star cosmetic assignment to some camp near Hollywood or even a role in the troops that entertained the military or recorded the war with motion picture equipment. Later, when he qualified for officer candidate school, he was commissioned a second lieutenant and went to flight training. In early 1945, he went to the Pacific combat area as a pilot with the Marine Transport Command, where he was based on Okinawa and Guam and ferried supplies to troops on Iwo Jima.

With their big meal ticket gone, 20th Century–Fox, ever vigilant at the cash register, naturally moved to find ways to keep making money from Tyrone Power. One solution was to rerelease his former hits. *In Old Chicago*, *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, and *Johnny Apollo* were all put back into circulation, and two of his most recent successes, *Blood and Sand* and *The Black Swan*, were kept out there, making the rounds, then being rebooked and never brought back for storage. The other way Fox cashed in on Tyrone Power without Tyrone Power was to do what studios always did—try to clone him. During Power's rise to fame, they had cleverly brought in a handsome young man named Richard Greene.* Born in England, Greene was appearing as the juvenile lead in a Terence Rattigan play in London in early 1938 when a Fox talent scout offered him a seven-year contract. Within weeks he was in America and preparing for his first movie, the prestigious John Ford melodrama *Four Men and a Prayer*, with Loretta Young. Although handsome and skilled, Greene lacked the underlying sexuality that had lifted Power to the top. Even if he had been a real threat, however, Greene was lost to Fox before America entered the war, having asked to be released from his contract in 1940 so he could return to England. (Greene enlisted in the Royal Armoured Corps of the Twenty-seventh Lancers. Postwar, he had an excellent career as television's Robin Hood, but never achieved the level of fame that Power did.)

The World War II Fox "Ty" was an actor named Cornel Wilde, another dark-haired, soft-eyed, mellifluous-voiced charmer. Wilde was a first-rate athlete, a member of the 1940 U.S. Olympic saber team. He entered movies when the Olympics were canceled because

of World War II, and bungled around in small roles as a lily-livered heavy (Warners' *High Sierra*, 1941) before finding fame as a leading man, most notably in his Oscar-nominated performance as Chopin in Columbia's *A Song to Remember* in 1945. Wilde was genuinely handsome and during the war years a solid leading male presence. His ability to do his own dueling inevitably took him into swashbucklers, and he replaced Power on the covers of fan magazines and in the hearts of many female fans while Power was away.*

When the war ended, Power was honorably discharged as a first lieutenant and returned to the United States on November 21, 1945. His military service had been an important part of his life, so much so that he joined the Marine Reserve Corps.† When Power came back, he was like everyone else who had served in the war—older and changed by his experience. For nearly three years he hadn't been a movie star. He had lived and worked among non-show-business people. He had a new sense of the world and of himself. He wanted to enact a more realistic kind of man on-screen, and he wanted to fulfill his theatrical heritage. Power *could* act, and he wanted to do so. Since he was no longer the new kid on the block, he felt it was someone else's turn to play sex symbol and his turn to be an actor. To Fox, however, he was still Tyrone Power, still the product they had developed. In March 1946, Fox released a short subject in which Power acted as a spokesman for the Red Cross. (This short was the first time his fans saw him in new material on film after the war.) The studio's plan was to use the Red Cross to say, "And here's your same old Tyrone Power." Power's plan was to use the short to say, "And here's my new serious presence." The postwar dance between studio and star had begun.

Both agreed, however, that to reconnect Power to his fans, his "return" feature should be as prestigious as possible. It was *The Razor's Edge* (1946), a multimillion-dollar adaptation of Somerset Maugham's best-selling novel. Darryl Zanuck planned to spare no expense. He surrounded Power with an all-star cast: Gene Tierney, John Payne, Anne Baxter, Clifton Webb, Herbert Marshall, and Elsa

Lanchester. The movie, released on November 19, 1946, was treated as a major media event. It ran a hefty 146 minutes, just to prove how important it was. Power received excellent reviews, and the movie was a great hit, one of the highest-grossing movies of the year. It received four Oscar nominations: Best Picture, Best Supporting Actress for Baxter, Best Supporting Actor for Webb, and Best Art Direction and Set Decoration. (Only Baxter won.) Power, looking beautiful as always, presented in the best Fox had to offer, seemed never to have been away.

A closer look, however, revealed small differences. The postwar Power was still an uncommonly handsome man, but where he had once seemed like a joyous bad boy who could be tamed by true love, he now seemed melancholy and even sedentary. Tyrone Power was clearly older, and he no longer looked like a buoyant young swashbuckler. He had a more stolid quality. Part of this is due to the role itself, that of Larry Darrell, a do-gooder on a quest for spirituality and inner peace, and who is always knowing what his friends need better than they do.

Underneath the movie's prestigious, allegedly serious surface lay an ugly truth. *The Razor's Edge* was designed to let Zanuck and Fox have their handsome old Ty Power and let *him* think they were going to take him seriously. Power believed *The Razor's Edge* was a serious movie—all that spirituality—and a serious property—all those numbers of books sold. But his Larry Darrell was still an object of desire by the leading lady (Tierney), a male character with that sense of the sexually unattainable that audiences found irresistible.

After *The Razor's Edge*, Power was put into the kind of epic costume film that he had excelled at before the war. *Captain from Castile* was also based on surefire box office potential—the best-selling adventure novel by Samuel Shellabarger. It was perfect “Tyrone Power” material, being the story of a Spanish nobleman who accompanied Cortés on his conquest of Mexico. Power headed a cast that included Cesar Romero, Lee J. Cobb, Barbara Lawrence, and a newcomer, Jean Peters, who would herself go on to become a star for Fox. Knowing the film would be a hit, the studio filmed it on location in Mexico in glorious Technicolor. A postwar shortage of

film stock with which to make color prints held up the release of the film, and suddenly a quick Tyrone Power movie was needed.

Power now pushed hard to fill the void with a small movie that he felt would present him to the public in a completely new way. He talked Darryl Zanuck into buying a novel called *Nightmare Alley* (written by William Gresham) to be adapted especially to star him in an unsympathetic role. Zanuck worried about this idea from the beginning. During all the story conferences, Zanuck's memos, as reprinted in Rudy Behlmer's *Memo from Darryl F. Zanuck*, indicate his concern that Power's character was going to alienate his fans. "There must be some way to get a certain amount of sympathy for him ... We should feel that there is a certain majesty in Stanton's decline ... While we want to keep him a man who has this miserable appetite for money and success, there must be a point where we feel sympathy for him" (November 5, 1946, memo).^{*} Most people feel that the resulting movie, also called *Nightmare Alley* (1947), is Power's best performance. He himself always thought so. Playing a carnival man who climbs his way to the top over a series of love affairs, Power brought to the role everything he had learned about ruthless people on their way to the top. When the movie was released in September 1947, he received excellent reviews.

All discussions of Power's career refer to *Nightmare Alley* as his best film and as the kind of work he wanted to do after World War II. Movie folklore defines his role as a huge "departure," because in the end, Power, the world's most beautiful man, ends up as a circus geek. Looking at the film, however, reveals something else. Power once again plays a cad, a seducer of women. No departure there. His character is ambitious and rises from striped T-shirt and jeans to tuxedo and well-cut suit. No departure there, either. And, yes, Power becomes a down-and-outer, a heavy drinker, and yes, he is offered the job of carnival geek and takes it, but we never see him bite the head off a chicken (the geek's stunt). Before he is forced to do it, he is rescued by his true love (the lovely young Coleen Gray). *Nightmare Alley* ends on a redemptive note, with Gray holding Power in her arms, reassuring him of her love and his future.

In *The Kings of the Bs*, an anthology of film history and criticism about low-budget movies (edited by Todd McCarthy and Charles Flinn), author Clive T. Miller says *Nightmare Alley* “is the quintessential B movie spoiled by A production.” It’s the definitive statement on the film. *Nightmare Alley* is a film noir, with dark and shadowy lighting, and the carny setting of a low-down world full of drifters and grifters. However, compared to some other noirs of the era, like *Detour*, *Gun Crazy*, or *Criss Cross*, its sleaze is fairly sanitary. Miller understands the problem thoroughly: “Tyrone Power had become a star in 1936 ... and none of his twenty-four movies since then had lost money for the studio.” As Miller sums it up, “They [the studio] had too much at stake to try something austere.”* Miller points out that Power is in every scene except two, which means that of the movie’s 111 minutes of running time, he is almost always on- screen. He has twenty-eight love scenes, divided among his three leading ladies (Joan Blondell, Gray, and Helen Walker). What one learns is that once Tyrone Power’s kind of stardom is set into the film noir world, things take a turn upward. Glamour interferes with the process. Noirs usually (not always) star lesser names or names that become great in subsequent decades (like Robert Mitchum), but not a glamour boy like Tyrone Power. His stardom is too big to be contained, and it certainly cannot be trashed. He can be tortured, and he can fall in the gutter, but he’s got to get up at the end and accept love, from both the leading lady and his audience.

It’s not Power’s fault, of course. He gives a good performance, but he was playing a role he had often played before—a hard-edged pushy guy who wants it all, uses women on the way there, learns his lesson the hard way, and then finds true love in the end.

Nightmare Alley did not find favor with the larger moviegoing public, just as Zanuck had predicted. It was the handwriting on Ty Power’s postwar wall. No matter how ambitious he was to do other things, he would have trouble breaking the chokehold of his stardom. He would wait until the very end of his career before he could again play a really seedy cad (in *Witness for the Prosecution* [1957]).

Zanuck had supported *Nightmare Alley* but had insisted that, in return, Power give the fans the old Ty Power. Zanuck had it waiting in the cans. *Nightmare Alley* (in black and white) had been put into release on October 9, 1947. The Technicolor *Captain from Castile* prints were now ready, and the film was released that December. The public responded enthusiastically. This was the Tyrone Power people remembered—in tights and looking good.

As far as the studio was concerned, everything about Power's career was peachy. As far as Power was concerned, *nothing* was peachy. He had tried to return to his regular Hollywood social life, in which he and Annabella entertained their friends in their beautiful home. But on May 20, 1946, when they hosted a party for David Niven and his wife, Primula, she fell down the cellar stairs, struck her head on the cement floor, and died the following day. Shortly afterward, Annabella left Hollywood to appear on Broadway, and even more shortly after that, announced her separation from Power. Their careers, she said, "were incompatible." It was the usual Hollywood euphemism; the incompatibility was that he was a star and her career had died.

Power had changed, but the studio had not changed, and the fans agreed with the studio. He wanted to be a great actor, and perhaps he could have been a great actor, but for all his disappointments and complaints, he cooperated with his studio too long. During 1946 and 1947, Power was back where everyone felt he belonged—on the cover of *Modern Screen*. (He appeared on *Modern Screen* covers twice in little more than a year, a record for male stars.*) A 1946 article—"Ty Power ... Wiped the Slate Clean"—put Power back into the hands of the publicity shapers from his earliest star machine days. The story told how he had entered the service and shed his identity as a movie star. The layout, however, sells the movie star with the usual drivel. There is a full-page photo of Power lounging around on the front steps of his mansion, and there are six other black-and-whites of him in what is no more than a carefully developed puff piece to say, "Don't worry, he's got that World War II silliness out of him and is home to stay." The 1947 issue has a glamour photo of him on the cover, with an

inserted small photo alongside, dressed in his *Captain from Castile* swashbuckling outfit, the way his public liked to see him. The cover story, allegedly written by the movie's director, Henry King, is laudatory. King, who was a genuine friend of Power's, had directed *In Old Chicago*, *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, *Jesse James*, *A Yank in the RAF*, and now *Captain from Castile*. Again, the story was designed to reassure the fans. Power's back, and King's got him. It will be business as usual. Power was young, and his absence from the screen had seemed not to have hurt him professionally. The studio felt they could humor him occasionally by meeting his requests for serious roles, but otherwise they'd continue to cast him in films that followed the pattern the star machine had established in 1937. There were light romantic comedies (*The Luck of the Irish* and *That Wonderful Urge* [1948]), lavish costume dramas (*Prince of Foxes* [1949], *The Black Rose* [1950], *I'll Never Forget You* [1951], *King of the Khyber Rifles* [1954], *The Mississippi Gambler* [1953]), westerns (*Rawhide* [1951], *Pony Soldier* [1952], and *Untamed*, a western set in South Africa [1955]), World War II combat-related (*American Guerrilla in the Philippines* [1950]), a Cold War spy movie (*Diplomatic Courier* [1952]), distinguished literary adaptations (*The Sun Also Rises* and *The Rising of the Moon* [1957]), biopics (*The Eddy Duchin Story* [1956], *The Long Gray Line* [1955]), and a seagoing disaster movie (*Abandon Ship* [1957]). From *Captain from Castile* in 1947 until his death in 1958, Tyrone Power would appear in eighteen movies. Not one of them was truly distinguished, although most did well enough financially and a few actually afforded him an opportunity to act.

Enthusiasm for film work began to die inside Power. His disappointment showed on-screen. He often seemed to be walking through his roles. Sadly for his ambitions and talents, his disillusionment affected his work and he began to look like an aging movie star whose ability was limited, a former pretty boy who couldn't act. He became less than he was.

Two movies well illustrate his last years at Fox: the lavish *Prince of Foxes* and the less expensive *Diplomatic Courier*. *Prince of Foxes* was a shrewd attempt to return Power to familiar territory: an

adaptation of another Samuel Shellabarger best seller. Set in the time of the Borgias, the movie had solid assets in European location shooting, still new to most American audiences, and in Orson Welles, who is awesome as Cesare Borgia, a role he was born to play. Power had begun to look slightly dissipated in his close-ups, although perhaps it was only the onset of the heart condition that would ultimately kill him. Certainly he had lost energy. The electricity that had marked his every entrance into the frame is gone. His eyes are dead. His jaw sometimes seems locked as he delivers his frequently hopeless lines. He's no longer a crackling young figure whose kinetic presence lights up the screen. The movie chooses to linger too long over his traditional close-ups after he's dragged on-screen as a torture victim. He's dirty, bloodied, his hands are bound. His bearded face is swollen, his eyes blackened. Power has allowed himself to be made up to look awful, almost as a punishment for his beauty.



Power's frustration is obvious in his postwar films such as *Prince of Foxes*. Years have gone by, and he's still wearing tights and curly hair.

Diplomatic Courier is a postwar spy movie, shot on location in the bombed-out cities of Europe. Power dashes around in a trench coat, but his character is not much more than a pawn. Although in the end he takes action to save his leading lady (Hildegard Neff), his presence is mostly passive. He is captured, bound, tortured, and laid out naked on a table. A modern story, *Diplomatic Courier* might have been a chance to create a more mature, postwar Power, but it doesn't happen. He's been a movie star for nearly sixteen years, and Hollywood is still taking his shirt off and torturing him for audience pleasure.

Knowing he wasn't being given acting challenges, Power became fully disillusioned with his status at 20th Century-Fox. After the release of his two 1952 features (in addition to *Diplomatic Courier*, he made *Pony Soldier*), Power boldly terminated his Fox contract.* He later summed up his years at the studio by saying, "I've enjoyed monetary advantages, true, but all my subsequent contracts and adjustments were largely based on the original 1936 contract I made. I simply had to close my eyes and plunge forward ... Fox did a lot for me, and I like to think the feeling is mutual. Let's face it, though. I've done an awful lot of stuff that's a monument to public patience." Behind the scenes, off the record, he spoke bitterly of how he had been used and how his years of loyal service had meant nothing to the studio. And the studio was pretty cranky, too. They felt they had made him a star and now he'd quit them. Their 1936 investment was no longer going to pay dividends.

During Power's last months under contract, Fox released a newsreel with Tyrone Power, the movie star, on location in Europe while making *Foxes*. Power is presented to Europe as an object to be enjoyed. He is seen diving into a swimming pool outside a villa and swimming the full length while a group of well-dressed Europeans with drinks in their hands stand alongside and watch him. Later,

he's at a cocktail party, sitting on a spindly couch, surrounded by well-coiffed women who are eyeing him as if he were something on their dessert plates. It's *La Dolce Vita* time. He also demonstrates a CinemaScope camera to a small knot of Spanish businessmen, all of whom are concentrating only on looking at him. (Everyone is clearly faking it to promote the product.) Power seems lost, unclear about what to do with himself, understanding only that he must be photographed, he must be charming, and he must look beautiful. He rises to the challenge. He flashes a megawatt grin, but his eyes are not smiling. "The secret of charm is bullshit," he told a friend.

Power didn't fare much better in the films he made after he left Fox. Only *The Long Gray Line* and *The Sun Also Rises* afforded him an opportunity to stretch himself.[†] The first cast him in a John Ford movie based on the life of Marty Maher, an Irish immigrant who began working at West Point as a waiter and ended up as assistant athletic director. Power was magnificent in a story about an ordinary man whose life added up to something special. He aged from a feisty young scrapper to a mellowed-out old man, and the true performance range that Hollywood had never allowed to blossom in Power was on full display. Despite its sentimentality, *The Long Gray Line* succeeds because of Power, who downplays his looks and creates a real human being. *The Sun Also Rises* was an all-star adaptation of the Ernest Hemingway novel, with Power in the role of Jake Barnes. Others included Ava Gardner (at the top of her box office appeal) as Lady Brett Ashley, and Errol Flynn, Mel Ferrer, Gregory Ratoff, Juliette Greco, Eddie Albert, and Robert Evans. Power did his best to portray the dignified anguish of the impotent Barnes, but perhaps the saddest comment, an epitaph for his whole career, was written in a review of the movie in *The Nation*. Said critic Robert Hatch, "It would never have occurred to me that Jake Barnes looked like Tyrone Power."



Tyrone Power's last great role was in Billy Wilder's *Witness for the Prosecution*, in which his capabilities were given a chance.

Perhaps the best performance Tyrone Power ever gave was in Billy Wilder's 1957 *Witness for the Prosecution*, the one movie Power made in his postwar freelance period that really stands out today. In *Witness*, Power plays the actor's worst nightmare: a person on trial. It's a thankless role that requires mostly sitting and reacting while the district attorney, the defense lawyer, a series of colorful witnesses, even the judge, jury, and trial audience get to ham it up all over the place. Power has only about 30 percent of the movie in which to shine as the slightly debauched but gracefully aging Leonard Vole, who is accused of murdering a rich old widow he picked up after charming her into changing her will for him. Power, at age forty-three, still looks very good. There's a crow's foot or two, and even a slight thickening of the face, but he's still beautiful. This role is *about* his looks, his charm, his ability to seduce. This time, his charm is a bit too *much* charm. His richly sexy voice is maybe a bit *too* rich and sexy. Where once he justified his sex appeal by playing

a spoiled young brat, or a wayward youth, he now uses it to play a rotting seducer well on his way to full decay as a wicked old roué.

The main challenge he faces is playing the role of a man who is playing a role. Slyly, the movie has him watch his old dame try on hats (“voting” for his favorite from outside a hat shop window) and then follow her into a movie theatre for an afternoon matinee. The two people with nothing to do during the day but go to the movies “re-meet” when he complains about her hat—the very hat he endorsed—which is blocking his view of the screen. (And what’s on the screen? It’s *Jesse James*.)

Because the film contains a surprise ending and deliberately misleads its audience about his character, Power has to strike just the right note, carefully balancing his performance between charm and rot. Audiences are allowed to see that he’s adorable, but also feckless, lazy, and jobless. (“I’m sort of an inventor,” he tells Charles Laughton, by way of explaining what he does with himself. “If I could just put my egg beater across ...”) After the trial is under way, Power has one grand moment in the witness box. Otherwise, he’s reduced to reacting in medium close-up, but his reactions are very important to the story. He has to be a vessel through which the audience can learn how the trial is going; he evaluates its progress for them as he struggles to understand the testimony. In other words, he objectively evaluates, yet at the same time, has to be emotional, to play his part of a man on trial for his life. He gets to show a controlled but triumphant relief when a damning witness is discredited. He has to show deep shock when his wife (a superb Marlene Dietrich) appears as a witness for the prosecution. And he has to show pain when she scornfully says she never really loved him. Yet he has to play these emotions very carefully, because they are false. Once he wins the trial, he plays the young, brash, overly confident Tyrone Power again. And, of course, since audiences know that person so well, he closes by being exactly who and what they always thought he was—Tyrone Power.

A movie like *Witness* shows how the careful casting of an actor whose meaning is “male sex object” *can* pay off. It was possible for someone like Power to be both used as the star presence he

represented *and* allowed to give a serious performance. Stars are story units and must be used as such. Casting must take their accepted “definitions” into account, working either with them or against them. And in a movie in which a trial will take place, setting three characters in an opposition that will not be clarified until the end, the stars need to be of equal weight. *Witness* has its three: Dietrich, Laughton, and Power. (They are supported by a very strong cast of character players: Elsa Lanchester, Henry Daniell, John Williams, and others.) Since the story is about a struggle of three equal egos, three big names were required. Power’s role is the least of the three (although key). Had it been played by someone who wasn’t a male movie star, the audience would have known instinctively that Vole probably did it. At the very least, they would not have been willing to give him sympathy or the benefit of the doubt. The pivot point of the trial, the barrister played by Laughton, also has to be strong enough to anchor the middle between Power and Dietrich. Her role as the clever minx who delivers all the real surprises *has* to be a star—even an icon, which she is—because the audience has to buy the fact that she could have called the shots all the way without Laughton knowing. With a lesser name in any of the three main roles, the audience would have felt cheated, or might have caught on. In the end, when they find out Dietrich was the one in control, it is her legendary status that allows them to buy in. “Of course, she fooled us! Of course, she fooled Laughton. She’s Marlene Dietrich.” (If ever there was a star who could trump any ace, it was Dietrich.) Audiences cannot reach the end of a plot like *Witness* and say, “Well, Veda Ann Borg fooled us.” Star power is star power. It overrules acting every time.

Too few movie roles like Leonard Vole had *ever* been available to Tyrone Power. Realizing that he wasn’t growing even after he left Fox, he began to run away from movies as often as he possibly could. During his final decade, he increasingly tried to break out of his movie star jail by working in theatre. His heritage was the stage, and prior to Hollywood he had acted in such productions as *Romeo and Juliet*, starring Katharine Cornell as Juliet, with Maurice Evans as Romeo, Ralph Richardson as Mercutio, and Florence Reed as the

nurse. (Power had played Benvolio.) He also appeared in Cornell's production of *Saint Joan* in 1936, in the role of Bertrand. He did two weeks playing the title role of *Liliom* at the Country Playhouse in Westport in 1941, and took over the London production of *Mister Roberts* in 1950 in the title role. When Charles Laughton staged *John Brown's Body* in 1953, Power appeared with a distinguished cast that included Judith Anderson and Raymond Massey, and he reunited with Cornell for *The Dark Is Light Enough* in 1954–55, playing the villainous role of Richard Gettner. There were also appearances in *A Quiet Place* (a play by Julian Claman) in 1955, in *The Devil's Disciple* in London in 1956, and *Back to Methuselah* for the Theatre Guild in New York in 1958.

But despite his theatre work, Tyrone Power postwar is still the story of a male movie star, a man the system thought too beautiful to be anything else. No movie role made audiences want to see him as anything but the handsome guy who dueled, or the handsome guy who wooed, or the handsome guy who was no better than he should be until he shaped up. Perhaps the story of what happened to his career—and why he was disappointed by it—is best summed up by looking at two movies he made, one in 1937 when the machine was building him and one when he returned from the war in 1948 when the machine refused to allow him to change. The first movie shows him being developed and the second sadly shows what he was developed into.

Love Is News (1937) and *That Wonderful Urge* (1948) were both made for 20th Century–Fox. The latter was a remake of the former. In the original, Power co-starred with the luminous Loretta Young, one of his best leading ladies, with his Fox peer Don Ameche as a desk-banging 1930s-type newspaper editor, and George Sanders as his romantic rival. In the remake his co-star was another of Fox's particularly beautiful females, Gene Tierney, and the Ameche role, once important to the movie's comedy, was reduced to a small part played by a non-name, Lloyd Gough. The Count Andre role that Sanders played was reduced in size also, upsetting the balance of the romantic triangle. The actor who plays it (Reginald Gardiner) provides no serious threat to Power.

The story these movies tell is slight. Both are escapist fare made for reasonably low budgets and built around star names. In the first version, Power plays a smart-assed and fairly ruthless reporter from a newspaper that covers society babes as if they were more important than Madame Curie. Power is slim, lushly beautiful, fast talking, and full of the joyous energy of his new success. His con man character breezes through the movie, all boldness and irresponsibility, with Power exhibiting (and having) all the self-confidence a guy like that would need to pull off the crazy deals he thinks up. It is a fortuitous meshing of Power on his way up with a character who thinks he can do anything and get away with it. The film is fun. Power looks as if stardom happened to him by accident and without his participation. He seems to understand what the deal will be and is comfortable with it. He's living in a filmed world in which a character like his—if he looked like Tyrone Power—would feel he could get away with anything. It's a world in which reporters hang out in a bar and play checkers on a black-and-white tiled floor with full shot glasses and beer mugs, and drinking what they capture.

Loretta Young plays a “tin can countess” and George Sanders is perfect as the smarmy European count who is trying to marry her for her money. The plot is echt-1930s in the screwball format. Back then, the material was still fresh and funny, and the stars, clothes, and settings provided delight for viewers for whom Hollywood represented the ultimate in everything desirable. Furthermore, satirizing the upper classes for the masses, and poking fun at publicity hounds and celebrities was not just innocent fun. It also somehow seemed important, good stuff for a movie to be about.

By the time Fox tried to get the script on its feet again in the late 1940s, there was no fun left, and certainly no relevance or freshness. (The plot had also been revamped and used in a Betty Grable vehicle called *Sweet Rosie O'Grady* in 1943. It was given a gay-nineties period setting, and Grable played a famous star who is outed as a former *Police Gazette* cover girl and beer hall singer.) Most of the supporting roles have been diluted or removed, and the titled sponger trying to marry Tierney (Gardner) has been toned

down, defanged. On the other hand, the pain Power inflicts on the leading lady is intensified.

Power plays with a consummate professionalism but has no energy. He and Tierney are *both* professionals, and they do their job. It's just that there isn't much to do and none of it means anything. They go through their paces as if they know it isn't really funny and they no longer even believe in their own careers. Both actors worked hard to succeed, and *This Wonderful Urge* is what they ended up with. It's not enough, and it shows. Furthermore, the postwar audience, operating on credit to make down payments on tract houses, doesn't need to envy the rich and poke fun at them quite as much as it did. This type of material has lost its playfulness and its purpose, gone with the winds of war. It would be Power's last light comedy role.

Seeing Tyrone Power walk through *That Wonderful Urge*, however professionally, nails down the source of his disappointment. Having designed him as the dream lover of the 1930s world of playboys, musicians, and adventurers, what does a studio do with a man like Power when he's a decade older and a world war wiser? There are only two choices: drop him and/or phase him out, or revamp him for the new era. Fox did neither. After the war, they chose to continue exploiting him as if it were still the 1930s, casting him in material beneath his talent. They had developed him to be a beautiful male movie star, and that's what they wanted him to be: their product, their investment. How he felt about it wasn't the issue for the studio.

Power was never the same after the war, but his career unfortunately *was* the same. Despite his unhappiness, he let it happen. (He assumed the role of the impotent Jake Barnes just a little too easily.) He married a second time, in 1948, to Linda Christian, and had two children. Hildegard Neff, the German actress, described what it was like to visit the Powers. "Tyrone and Linda stood beside their Roman-style swimming pool, the fairest of the fair gathering. They represented the Hollywood of the rich, famous, and lavishly frivolous, and their guests could have been selected from the latest film calendar." Power had gone back to

living the same life he had lived in the late 1930s with Annabella. After he divorced Christian, he married a third time, to Debbie Minardos, in May 1958. Although he kept on with his career, he seemed just to be going through the motions. He and Minardos were expecting a child* when he began filming yet another costume movie in which he would look pretty, wear costumes, and use a sword effectively. It was to be called *Solomon and Sheba*, and the great King Vidor would direct. Power's fellow cast members would be the beautiful Italian actress Gina Lollobrigida, and as the villain, his old co-star George Sanders. Power was to be King Solomon. On November 15, 1958, Power and Sanders were filming a dueling scene when Power suddenly collapsed. Shortly after being taken to the hospital, he died. He was only forty-four.† It was a sad and unexpectedly early ending to a career that had at its center a man who could have been a legend. Former leading lady Alice Faye commented, "Ty was the victim of the Hollywood system that grinds actors and actresses down, makes them give their blood and their souls to making movies."



Tyrone Power shortly before his death at the age of forty-four.

The saddest thing about Tyrone Power's final years is that he himself could only learn what he should have understood from the beginning: Once the machine made him a movie star, he could never be anything but a machine-made movie star. He was born to be an actor, but he had signed on with a system that was driven by money and the need to make it. So it took the easy way to sell him. Had he not been so beautiful, he might have been given more challenging parts, but Hollywood knew people would pay money to see Tyrone Power without his shirt on, whether he was acting or not. For someone without talent, it was the perfect job. For Tyrone Power, who actually *could* act, it had to have been some kind of hell.

* A great deal has been made of how women stars were turned into objects of desire or reduced to mere sex objects for "the male gaze." Not much has been said about how men underwent the same treatment. When the young and gorgeous Henry Fonda enters the story in *The Farmer Takes a Wife* (1935), he is framed, lit, and photographed the same as if he were the new girl at the studio. He is presented as an object to be desired. (Fonda was being groomed for future profit in his first film, playing opposite an established star, Janet Gaynor.)

* Zanuck was aware of the unique quality to Power's voice. In a memo to Jean Renoir, who was preparing to direct a movie to be called *Swamp Water* in 1941, Zanuck wrote "When you learn more about [Power's] work, you will realize he has a voice which would never be adaptable to this locale. His voice is a quality voice and every effort we have made in the past to adapt it to backwoods requirements has completely failed." (Letter dated May 26, 1941.)

* *In Old Chicago* was technically a January 1938 release, but was made in 1937. It was allowed to become "a 1937 feature" in a slightly rule-bending effort by which Fox was able to put character actress Alice Brady up for a Best Supporting Actress Oscar. She played Power's mother, the famous Mrs. O'Leary whose cow kicked over the lantern that started the Chicago fire. She won. *In Old Chicago* was also nominated for Best Picture, Best Writing, Original Story, Best Score, Best Sound Recording, and Best Assistant Director, the last year that category was included in the annual show.

* Power would star opposite such beauties as Rita Hayworth, Betty Grable, Maureen O'Hara, Susan Hayward, Anne Baxter, Marlene Dietrich, Ava Gardner, Dorothy Lamour, Myrna Loy, Joan Fontaine, and Norma Shearer. In most cases, however beautiful and

talented his co-star was, the ladies themselves always remarked on how often they would be queried about *him* by people afterward. “All my life,” Alice Faye said in the late 1970s, “I was asked what it was like to kiss Tyrone Power.”

* Zanuck needed such handsome, preferably dark-haired, leading men to play opposite his famous “studio blondes.” Not only Power, but also Don Ameche, John Payne, Victor Mature, Cornel Wilde, Richard Greene, and Dale Robertson were all Fox male stars who had to play male foils in musicals. The nonmusical Power nevertheless worked well in these movies, playing either a bandleader (as in *Ragtime*) or a gangster hanging around Broadway (*Rose of Washington Square* [1939]).

* It was released early the next year.

* Not appearing on the list doesn’t mean a star wasn’t influential or popular or even the top draw at his or her own studio. But appearing on it *does* mean popularity. The lists reveal at what year stars “arrived” and at what point they began to fade. They are also surprising. Some great names don’t appear at all, and many one-dimensional stars do. For instance, Sonja Henie, an Olympic champion ice-skater, was a top-ten-ranked draw in 1937, 1938, and 1939. She was cute, pert, and obviously could ice-skate. (She had three Olympic gold medals and ten world championships.) She had, in fact, revolutionized the sport of ice skating while still a very young girl. In putting her under contract, 20th Century–Fox bought themselves a ready-made star. All Fox had to do was build on top of the success Henie had already built for herself. The Fox theory was that Henie could make money for them only until the public tired of the skating novelty—and that would probably be long enough to warrant their investment. Since they didn’t have to spend to create her, they didn’t have to worry about casting her as anything but an ice-skater—and forget genre flexibility or longevity. (Henie definitely paid off.)

† Three of his movies for 1938 would be chosen by *Film Daily* as among the year’s ten best (*In Old Chicago*, *Alexander’s Ragtime Band*, and *Marie Antoinette*). In 1938, he had made the Box Office Top Stars of the Year list, in last place. In 1939, he would be the second-most-powerful star at the box office for the year, behind only Mickey Rooney and ahead of both Spencer Tracy and Clark Gable (in that order). He would be fifth on the list in 1940, and these three years would be the peak of his box office popularity for his entire career.

* Myrna Loy, in a presentation at New York’s Town Hall in the 1970s, said Power “was a lovely gentleman with a great quality of imagination.” She said he told her that if he could be anything in the world he wanted to be, he would be “the wind.”

* Everybody had their *Johnny Apollos*. Power's time as a gangster in the story is akin to the period of time in a woman's film in which the woman is given the power she will later renounce for marriage and motherhood. He gets to behave badly and then he reforms himself. Lamour, looking cheap and delivering her lines with an excellent tough-as-nails quality, delineates his bad side. Down on her luck, she tells Power, "I'm starvin' to death in a mink coat." Later, she, too, will reform.

* Power's back-to-back releases—*The Mark of Zorro* (November 1940) and *Blood and Sand* (May 1941)—are famous remakes, the first of a Douglas Fairbanks Sr. hit and the second of a Valentino success. Only Tyrone Power had the qualities of male/female, active/passive it took for one actor to re-create movies made by two such different stars.

* To prove how serious the film was for Power, it introduces him in pitch darkness. Power meets his true love on a village street during a blackout. For a few minutes, he cannot be seen. It is tantamount to making the statement: And it won't be Power's good looks that define *this* character. Later, to emphasize the point, he is told that he is merely acceptable looking because his "ears stick out a bit" and his face is "slightly off angle." Since the audience is looking at Tyrone Power during these comments, the result is less than effective.

† *The Black Swan* was shot on a large body of water behind the Fox studios that had been named Tyrone Power Lake in his honor.

* *Crash Dive* was an exciting movie that combined romance (with Anne Baxter) and combat, including a tense commando raid.

* Attempts to generate Tyrone Powers continued and included both John Payne and Dale Robertson. Even Tony Curtis, a Universal contract player in the 1950s, was in the mode of Power. Curtis turned out to be an original, however, and carved his own famous stardom. At first a pretty boy, Curtis, a fine actor and a man of wit and intelligence, went on to claim the serious acting roles that had largely eluded Power. John Derek was also referred to as "Powerish," as was the French star Alain Delon, who had smoky blue eyes, thick eyelashes, and Gallic charm.

* Wilde's fame today lies in the remarkable movies he both acted in and produced, such as *The Big Combo* (1955) and the distinctive films he also directed, such as the harrowing combat film *Beach Red* in 1967. Wilde found a way to beat the system that Power never found.

† Shortly before he died, Power was promoted to major, a fact that has never much been publicized. All his life, Power retained his love of flying and made a celebrated public

relations junket with his friend Cesar Romero. He piloted his own plane, named *Saludos Amigos*, around Central America and South America, to promote goodwill and sell American movies.

* “*Nightmare Alley* will lose at least five hundred thousand dollars, in spite of the fact that it was cheaper than many of the other Tyrone Power pictures ...” was Zanuck’s later word on the subject (April 27, 1948).

* Miller even suggests that the idea Power had to beg for the part may be a myth. He believes that the studio spread the story around to build advance audience sympathy and interest in seeing Power in something different.

* Because of his extraordinary looks, Power was one of the few male stars to have repeated cover appearances. Covers for men were fairly rare. Some others who were real cover boys were Bing Crosby, Alan Ladd, and Van Johnson. Two surprise multiple cover boys were Cornel Wilde, a Power “replacement,” and Ronald Reagan.

* Power went freelance, but his first feature of his own choice didn’t break new ground for him. It was *Mississippi Gambler*, with Power still in beautiful period costumes, still dueling with a rival ... because *that* was the only type of role the freed Tyrone Power could find financial backing for.

† He also had a big hit in *The Eddy Duchin Story*, which might just as well have been called *The Tyrone Power Story*.

* Their son, Tyrone William Power, was born January 22, 1959, a little over two months after Power’s death. He would later be known as Tyrone Power IV. Power’s other two children were from his marriage to Linda Christian: Romina, born October 2, 1951, and Taryn, on September 13, 1953.

† Although the movie had been more than half finished, Power’s footage was scrapped, and he was replaced by Yul Brynner. The final film was released to poor reviews.

DISOBEDIENCE: LANA TURNER AND ERROL FLYNN

Lana Turner and Errol Flynn both ended up in the courtroom—not exactly the place their “buildups” were supposed to take them. It’s one thing to become a household name. It’s something else to become notorious. Turner and Flynn were ideal products of the star machine—two people who were so glamorous, so exciting, so full of life, and so willing to drive in the fast lane that they generated their own publicity. The problem was they generated too much, and in the end it affected their careers in a bad way. They found themselves unable to play anything on-screen except what the public thought they were offscreen. They were typecast, all right, but outside the machine’s control and locked into their worst personal mistakes—all because they just wanted to have fun.

LANA TURNER



Lana Turner

Lana Turner was never once in the annual Motion Picture Exhibitors of America list of the top ten box office stars, and yet her name, the deliciously seductive “Lah-na,” is still famous ten years after her death and nearly thirty years after she made her last movie. Her stardom was not of the moment. Born a star, she died a star. This is particularly significant since her fame was based on glamour and sex, which means that she had to be very much *of* her time. She was and is, yet she endured. Lana Turner is the epitome of Hollywood machine-made stardom. She got to the top at a time in movie history when there were many beautiful young hopefuls to triumph over, but she entered the system and rose up through it like a rocket. And then something went wrong.

Although she was a top professional with an uncanny camera instinct, Turner’s opportunity to develop as an actress passed after a series of sensational events in her private life. Her screen roles began to reflect these personal scandals, and, with three or four exceptions, the movies she played in were drivel. Because no one would take her seriously, no one would give her a serious part. She found herself speaking lines like “I would be loved as a woman—not as a goddess” and “Do you think I should put in an elevator [to the bedroom]?” A good director could have used her raw emotional power and guided her to a stunning performance, but she lost the opportunity to work with such directors. The little girl who was a fizzy vanilla soda became a champagne cocktail and then a frozen daiquiri. She was a star too often hitched to a wagon.

After her first years in the star machine, a personal and professional transformation took place. The lovely young girl became a glamour queen, wise to the world, even cynical. She became the kind of woman whom men most desired, dangerous in a thrilling way, but safe and companionable, too. In Lana Turner the public found the thing they like best in a movie star: ambivalence, a

mysterious mixture of good and bad. Her image was undeniably one of glamour, satin, furs, and diamonds, but it was sitting on a drugstore stool. She was the perfumed boudoir, but also the ice cream parlor. She was glamorous, but also girlish. She was a tigress, but also a kitten. At first, she was wholesome and good, with just a hint of the bad. Later, she wasn't all bad; she had a hint of the good. She had come from nowhere and nothing, but she got it all. And then she had to pay dearly for it.

Turner stayed the course but let herself be used. It was what she had been taught to do by the studio system. She accepted limited roles and became a *true* sex symbol—an actress who played roles in which the meaning of the character came from a source other than the script, her own private life. She was cast only in roles that were symbolic of what the public knew—or thought they knew—of her life from the headlines she made as a *person*, not as a movie character. Thus, Lana Turner reversed the usual pattern of star development. She began to act out her *own* life on the screen, making a myth and ritual out of herself. This ritualization isolated her from her natural talent. Her person became her persona.

Adela Rogers St. Johns once said, “Let’s not get mixed up about the real Lana Turner. The real Lana Turner is Lana Turner. She was always a movie star and loved it. Her personal life and her movie life are one.” It’s a great tribute to Turner’s glamour, and to the fact that she may indeed be the ultimate definition of the term “movie star.” But how could anybody really believe it? Are we supposed to assume that Turner was never really a person? That she had no feelings, no pain, no failures? That she was born on film? What it says is that Lana Turner’s greatest performance was in the role of movie star, and that she was so good at it that no one could think of her as anything else.

There is a chilling moment that verifies Turner’s born-on-film life. In the 1960 movie *Portrait in Black*, not one of her better movies, there is a striking finale. The gorgeous Lana, no longer a kid, is photographed looking out of an attic window. Her face is anguished (although her hairdo is first rate and her makeup perfect). Suddenly she is frozen in what becomes an unfriendly

frame. The beautiful blond, blue-eyed, expensively gowned star we all know and recognize fades into a black-and-white image, all color drained from her. The new drab, colorless image itself then fades down into a negative. Like the process of evolution in reverse, Lana Turner is taken backward through the camera process. She's reduced to film stock, seeming to verify the St. Johns concept: Lana Turner is not real. She's an image—nothing more, nothing less. Born not in a trunk but on film stock. Not just photogenic, but also photogenetic. The fact that the movie would present her this way can't help making a viewer wonder, *Who is Lana Turner?* Where did she come from?

When Turner first started in films, she was more of a little girl than Shirley Temple ever was, because her performances were less calculating. Some of her early film roles present her with an upswept hairdo, dressed in white fur and long gloves, looking like somebody's little sister out on a blind date trying to pass herself off as a grown-up. When she first came into the studio system, she was like a kid who went to the party where they ran out of cake and ice cream before they got to her. She started looking for her own share, with an appetite that wasn't going to settle for a little of anything.

Lana Turner's real life is the tragic version of what people think of when they imagine the story of how a star is born. It's full of disaster, poverty, and legend right from the beginning. She was born Julia Jean Mildred Frances Turner in a little Idaho mining town in 1920. An only child, she was called Judy. Her mom was a teenager and her dad a smooth-talking gambler. In a crime that went unsolved, he was bludgeoned to death sometime around Christmas 1930, his body abandoned in a tough San Francisco neighborhood. His left shoe and sock, where he was known to stash his winnings, were missing. Turner said later that this murder was both a shock and a dominant influence on her life. Her mother had to work (in a beauty parlor), so she boarded Judy out to a family that badly mistreated her. ("I was a scullery maid, a cheap Cinderella with no hope of a pumpkin," Turner said.) When Mrs. Turner discovered the abuse, she took Judy back, but times were bad for them. Mom had no education, no family support, and it was the Depression. They

kept themselves alive, and used the movies—it's always the movies—as their best shared escape from reality. Finally, they took a chance on changing their luck by moving to the fantasy capital of the universe: Hollywood. Turner's mother got a job at the Lois Williams Beauty Salon, and Judy was packed off to school. Hollywood High School. And yes, there really was such a place.

Judy Turner was no student. She had moved around from school to school, never learning much of anything and never finding a teacher who could help her. No one ever suggested that Lana Turner was stupid (except about men), but she was never a scholar. School bored her, and she felt no connection to it or anyone in it. Whenever she found the opportunity, she would cut class and run out, usually across the street to Currie's Candy and Cigar Store.* There, when she had the money, she liked to sit up on a stool and grab herself a quick Coke and maybe a peek at the movie magazines. One day in January 1936, about a month before she turned sixteen, a man named Billy Wilkerson spotted Turner there. He was the editor of the movie trade paper *Hollywood Reporter*. Turner was young, beautiful, and had a luscious body. Wilkerson couldn't take his eyes off her, so he invited her to come to his office to discuss the possibility of a movie career. Her mother went with her, and Wilkerson sent them over to Zeppo Marx, the unfunny brother who was a top-notch Hollywood agent. Marx looked Turner over once and signed her immediately.

This story, with the poverty somewhat sanitized, was Turner's original "star bio."† Then it became her legend, and then the prototype legend for all movie stars—the unexpected discovery of a youngster sitting in the candy store, or running an elevator, or ushering at a movie house, or driving a truck. In Turner's case, as in all cases, the real story had to be inflated and dramatized. Currie's Candy and Cigar Store? Nah, nobody's heard of it. Make it Schwab's Drug Store, the Hollywood landmark. A Coke? Nah, too ordinary, no zing. Make it a chocolate malted. Standing and thumbing through movie magazines? Nah, makes it sound too calculating—we want her to be just a little schoolgirl with no thoughts of fame and

fortune. How about we put her on a stool, just sipping that soda like she was, well, like she was one of the audience. Exactly when the stool and the soda were larded into the legend isn't clear, but it may well have been after the public first really focused on Turner in a movie prophetically called *They Won't Forget* (1937). In it, Turner sat on a stool in a drugstore and sipped a soda. Which came first in Lana's legend, the chicken or the egg?

After Turner was signed by Marx, she was taken around the studios. David O. Selznick liked her looks and gave her a bit part in his big budget movie of the year, *A Star Is Born* (a title to feed her legend). She made her debut in a racetrack scene, but she spent nearly another year still making the rounds. She was rejected over and over again because of her youth and inexperience and because she really didn't know how to act. ("I didn't say she could act!" her agent is supposed to have bellowed at one casting agent. "I said she could be a movie star.") Turner tried out for everything available, including the role of Scarlett in *Gone with the Wind* and the mousy little wife in *Rebecca* (1940). Her screen tests for these Selznick pictures still exist. In them, it's clear that she's little more than a child. She has no poise, very little ability, and no self-confidence. Yet her voice is distinctive, soft and alluring. She has big beautiful eyes and is pretty. Furthermore, the camera likes her. More to the point, *she* likes the camera. Right from the start, Turner had a unique relationship with the camera. There is one significant childhood photograph—the one that's always published, as if it were the only one ever taken. (It might well be the only one. Turner's childhood was every bit as unstable and deprived as Marilyn Monroe's, but unlike Monroe, Turner elected not to make it an issue.) In this picture, the little girl's hair has been frizzled to a fare-thee-well (presumably by the loving hands of her mother). Her smile is radiant. She has drawn her coat around herself in a perfect copy of a mannequin's studied grace, spreading it open to reveal the dress underneath. One foot is set perfectly in front of the other, showing off shabby shoes and little rolled stockings. Hands clasped, jaunty as can be, the child has struck a pose. She has given the camera what it was looking for—a willing presence, a little touch of

personality, and a lot of cheesecake. Lana Turner at least always had an idea that she *might* be Lana Turner, and she reached for the glamour at a young age.

Turner's big break came when she was taken to see film producer-director Mervyn LeRoy, one of the big names of the late '30s and early '40s. (He had directed such hit movies as *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, 1930's *Little Caesar*, and *Gold Diggers of 1933*.) LeRoy was preparing to direct a tough little film adapted from the novel *Death in the Deep South* by Ward Greene, which was based on a true-life incident. The film, to be called *Murder in the Deep South*, would star the excellent actor Claude Rains, and LeRoy needed just the right young girl to play the role of Mary Clay, who would be raped and murdered early in the movie. The role was small, but it was key. Everything depended on finding someone who was pretty, young, and—here was the hard part—both innocent and sexy. LeRoy knew that whoever he cast *had* to leave a definite impression on the audience. In only twelve minutes of running time, this pretty young thing must be unforgettable, powerful enough to keep the audience remembering, so they would feel the tragedy of her murder. And, just like the characters in the movie who mourn her loss enough to lynch the man they think murdered her, the audience needed to want her to be avenged. All of this LeRoy saw in the nervous little girl in his office. In Judy Turner, he knew he had found exactly what he wanted. She was still a kid, but she had sex appeal in abundance. As he looked her over and assessed her for physical problems in the usual manner, he saw she would be easy to photograph, having no bad angles, no slight casts in one eye, no poor posture or strange figure faults. She was no “fixer-upper,” and she was young and malleable. When he offered her the part, she said, “I’ll have to ask my mother.”

Mom, no dummy, said yes, and falling into the hands of Mervyn LeRoy was one of Turner's best pieces of career luck. LeRoy actually *was* a mentor to her, and not a “mentor.” He was a good person, highly respected in the film industry, and he protected and guided the unskilled girl. His decency and experience ensured her future. LeRoy knew what he had when he signed Judy Turner, so he

himself directed her early steps through the star machine process. First, of course, her name had to be changed. Turner was okay, but Julia Jean Mildred Frances wasn't going to cut it on marquees, and Judy seemed too childish. After long deliberations, Judy herself is said to have suggested the name Lana. It was supposed to be pronounced "Lah-nah," but over the years it was usually given a flatter sound. Either way it didn't matter to Hollywood, but for Turner it was always an irritation not to hear it as she thought it should sound, as she had first romantically imagined it.

LeRoy, a talented pro, knew that Turner *must* be costumed provocatively yet honestly, for *They Won't Forget* (the movie's new title). Her original wardrobe test shots show her dressed modestly, in a polka-dotted dress with a white lace collar, little buttons down the front, a black sash at her waist, and a simple black-and-white hat. She looks fresh and innocent. The sash draws the eye away from her bosom, and the hat tilts backward to reveal a naïve but charming face. Mervyn LeRoy personally changed this outfit. "Sweaters and schoolgirls are synonymous," he said, and "it was very important that the girl in our story have what they call 'flesh impact' ... I figured a tight sweater on a beautiful girl would convey to the audience everything we couldn't say outright." Turner was re-dressed. In the film, she wears a tight black skirt topped off by a clinging short-sleeved sweater with an open V-neck and a little scarf. A small thin belt circles her waist, making the outfit even tighter and ensuring that the audience will look at her full bosom, now emphasized and on display. She wears a perky little tam set at an insolent angle. These clothes were still believable as what an ordinary person might wear, but the new outfit totally changes her look from a sweet small-town girl to a saucy baggage who knows the impact she has on men and is willing to let it happen.

In *They Won't Forget*, "Lah-na" Turner more than fulfills the demands of her brief scenes. She doesn't do it through any particular acting skill but through her remarkable physicality. She has three opportunities to grab the audience. She's first seen in a business college classroom. Turner still has her natural dark hair color, and she flashes her dimples at a flustered male teacher,

seductively asking him to help her with her schoolwork. It's obvious she knows how to flirt and is aware that men like her. In her next scene, she's totally comfortable in front of the camera as she climbs up on a stool at an ice cream shop and smartly orders the gaping soda clerk to "make mine a chocolate malted and drop an egg in it as fresh as you." Finally, her really big moment—and one that appears in almost any compilation film about Hollywood—is her famous walk from the soda fountain, down the street, and back to the school building, where she will be raped and murdered offscreen. Lana Turner walking down the street in a seventy-five-foot tracking shot had all the "flesh impact" anyone could possibly hope for. She was a beautiful young girl with a free-swinging walk. She was natural, comfortable with herself physically, seeming even to have a delicious thrill in her own beauty, a joy in the simple act of walking down the street and knowing all eyes were on her. Her hips swayed, her buttocks jiggled, and her breasts bounced. Shoulders back, head held high, Turner sashayed down the street and into stardom. Later, at MGM, this walk would be polished into an acceptable one for the censor, but one of Lana Turner's greatest assets would always be her confident, graceful walk that commanded every eye in the house. LeRoy said, "When Lana walked down the street, her bosom seemed to move in a rhythm all its own. Later, when I added the musical score to the picture, I made sure the composer emphasized that rhythm with his music." In only a few minutes, Lana Turner carved a lifetime career.



Lana Turner in her original costume for *They Won't Forget* (originally titled *Murder in the Deep South*) ... and in her redesigned, sexier outfit.



They Won't Forget was released in June 1937. Turner's first fan mail started coming in, referring to "the girl in the sweater." She was too new for audiences to know her name, and the studio publicity agents decided to capitalize by dubbing her "the Sweater Girl," a nickname she hated. In her later years, Turner took pains to remind people that the legend of her having been discovered on a soda fountain stool was wrong, and that the real place she was spotted was far less glamorous. *They Won't Forget* proves her wrong. Her *real* discovery took place in *that* drugstore on *that* stool. Sitting at the counter, dimpling away, flirting, and coyly confessing, "You know I can't stay mad," Lana Turner captured the attention of the true discoverers of movie stars—the American moviegoing public. The legend can stand.

After her "discovery" in her "debut" film, Lana Turner had earned the chance to try to become a *real* movie star. The studio (Warners) began to work her steadily, looking for her type and testing her audience appeal through the usual star machine process.

She appeared in a bit part in Warners' *The Great Garrick* (1937) and was loaned to Samuel Goldwyn for *The Adventures of Marco Polo* (1938). By 1938, when she was only eighteen years old, she was earning a steady income for herself and her mother (\$75 a week). She made a short (*Pictorial Review* # for Vitaphone) about horses used in movies. She was taken out to the Kellogg Ranch (where Arabian horses were raised), tricked out in boots, jodhpurs, a perky man's hat, and, of course, a tight sweater, as if she were to the manor born and rode horses every day of her life. Still with dark hair, Turner is filmed alongside another equally gorgeous-looking young would-be star, Ronald Reagan, who really did know about horses.

Turner had two mentors. Billy Wilkerson constantly "planted" her name in the *Hollywood Reporter*, and Mervyn LeRoy watched over her and protected her professionally. When LeRoy was lured away from Warner Bros. by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1938, he asked if he could take Turner with him and Jack Warner told him to go ahead. Warner thought LeRoy's little girl, unschooled and naïve, would never amount to much, and even if she did, Warners didn't make the kind of movies that were going to be suitable for her.

Young Lana Turner moved into the right place at the right time in the right way. At the peak of the studio system, the doors of the number-one studio for developing glamorous stars opened to her, and she entered them on the arm of an important man. Mervyn LeRoy arrived at MGM as King of the Lot, as big a name as there was in those years. LeRoy's decision to move his studio and take his protégée along shaped Turner's life forever. MGM was the studio she was born for, with its roster of famous movie actresses, its prestigious presentations, and its devotion to the star system. LeRoy immediately "sold" her to Benny Thau, one of Metro's most important star makers, who went to work at once to shape and promote her through the established machine system.

Under the careful guidance of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer personnel, Turner was put into all of MGM's "star" classes and, because she was still a kid who hadn't finished school, she was enrolled at MGM's famous "little red schoolhouse" with her fellow students (or,

as they viewed it, her fellow inmates) Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, and Freddie Bartholomew. She underwent the usual buildup process. ("They brought us along slowly," she later said. "I posed for the dumbest Valentines!") She was given the usual lessons about filmmaking itself—finding her marks, learning her lines, practicing her diction, knowing where the camera was and how to play to it, et cetera. Since her actual previous moviemaking experience was limited, MGM put her into a short, *Rhumba Rhythm*, paired with Chester Morris. The two of them sit at a ringside table in a nightclub, and Turner, photographed in sepia, is wearing one of the exotic turbans she later made famous. This type of short film chattel work in which she was little more than a clotheshorse helped to put her name and face forward, gave her filming experience, and kept her working while she was being developed.

The studio then put Turner's feature film plan into place. First, she was to be cast in one of MGM's most reliable and successful low-budget "series" films, the *Andy Hardy* movies. *Love Finds Andy Hardy* (1938) was a big test. Turner was being given her main chance in a juicy role: "that redheaded vampire, Cynthia Potter." The part was small enough that if it had been played by someone with less oomph it could have gone unnoticed. But Turner, whining and pouting, dimpling and winking, teases Andy Hardy almost out of his pants. She wrinkles up her nose. She puts her arms around her full bosom to give herself a hug. She gives out with a delicious little giggle and puckers up for Andy's kiss. After she kisses him, she makes him show off for her, ignores him, torments him, and finally ditches him. Turner is in heady company. Mickey Rooney was a scene stealer par excellence, but she holds her own with him. She's relaxed, easy, and sexy beyond her years. She seems to know that she's got it, and she makes the most of it.

As a beginner, Lana Turner had a light touch, and MGM recognized it. Properly developed, she might have become an elegant comedienne, not unlike Carole Lombard. She had the humor, and she had the class. Following the usual star development procedure, however, MGM tried Turner out in all kinds of roles. Sensing her unusually high level of glamour, they thought of her as

more than a comedienne. They wanted to see how much drama she could do, how far they could stretch her into melodrama or tragedy. Because she was so young, they figured they had plenty of time to work with her and mine her potential.

Turner moved forward rapidly under Metro's guidance. Between her *Andy Hardy* appearance in 1938 and her first real A picture starring role in 1941 in *Ziegfeld Girl*, she made eight movies. Although all were more or less "programmers"—a low-budget form of an A movie—she was the leading lady, and the definition of what her stardom would be was being measured. Her last small part was in 1938's *The Chaser*, and her last supporting roles were in two movies from the same year, *Rich Man, Poor Girl* (playing the daughter in a poor family) and *Dramatic School* (co-starring Luise Rainer and Paulette Goddard, with Turner playing the wise-cracking Ginger Rogers-type role in a *Stage Door* rip-off). These were unchallenging opportunities for audiences to see her while she gained experience. Turner is a real eye-catcher but not yet the glamorous creature she would become. Her sexuality hasn't yet been fully exploited in a mature way by Metro. That first happens in 1939, in another one of Metro's popular series movies, *Calling Dr. Kildare*, in which Lana Turner received her first grown-up role as a sex object. She played it to the hilt.

Set at the fictional Blair Hospital, the Kildare films delivered audiences a beloved set of familiar characters originally created by the writer Max Brand. There was the cranky old curmudgeon Dr. Gillespie, chewed up to the highest emotive level by a wheelchair-bound Lionel Barrymore, and the noble young medic Dr. Kildare, well played by Lew Ayres. Their relationship was the stuff sitcoms would later be made of: testy but affectionate and respectful. Barrymore wheeled his chair around at top speed, yelling, "Get out of my way, you congenital idiots," at his staff, and everyone loved him for it, while Kildare always did the right thing, except when the plot required otherwise. Turner played the sister of a gunshot victim Kildare illegally treats (in fact, he performs a blood transfusion in a slum basement using his own blood, a feat that probably qualified him for the Nobel Prize in Medicine). Turner is allowed to be cheap

for the first time. She's heavily made up but still lovely, and it's obvious that she has total confidence in her sexual magnetism. Lighting a cigarette in her wet mouth and handing it over to the hapless Kildare, she casually stops her car in Central Park and seduces him. (Told she has a beautiful name, Rosalie, she sarcastically replies, "Well, it ought to be pretty. I paid five dollars for it.")

Metro now knows it's got more than an ordinary beautiful ingenue in Turner. Lingering close-ups, superbly lit, give the audience time to do more than study her. They can *moon* over her—forget the plot. Turner plays a luxury-loving bad girl—a role she inhabits easily and that she'll be repeating often. ("She's a bad little girl and you should have known it," Gillespie snaps at Kildare.) Turner does what a star has to do. Saddled with a role that isn't very well written and is at best a cliché, she defines it with her own presence. She embraces the look of the ripest young floozy on the block, and gives it that extra something, the x factor that defines stardom. After *Kildare*, she was never again anything but the leading lady in every film she made. MGM had learned a lot about Turner. She could wear any type of clothes beautifully, and her hair looked good in any style or any color—blond, platinum, red, brown, or black. She was relaxed and easy, with movements that were naturally sexy. She could back away from a man, look him over with a twinkle in her eye, and move right back in on him. She understood a certain look in a man's eye, and she put that knowledge to work. She could respond to it in an actor or duplicate it for herself.

Since MGM made successful musicals, it was logical that studio heads would consider Turner's possible future as a musical star. In *These Glamour Girls* (1939), she's a dime-a-dance girl, and in *Dancing Co-Ed* (1939) she's a hoofer who pretends to be a coed, hoping to land a role in a movie about college girls. These movies show Turner in transition—still young, looking fantastic but without her own specific definition. She's being shopped around for movie type, and both these films give her a chance to do a little dancing. In *These Glamour Girls* she has a showcase moment. Mistakenly invited

to a college weekend by a drunken college boy (Lew Ayres again), Turner shows up happy and excited, only to be ridiculed by his rich friends. She triumphs over them by admitting she's a taxi dancer, then challenging the boys to fork over their dimes to dance with her. Naturally, like the fans in the audience, they are more than willing to pay for a few moments with Turner. She's a knockout in slinky black when she takes the floor and does an impromptu dance that's one of the highlights of her early movies. Relaxed, full of life, and naturally graceful, Turner releases her innate sense of fun and warmth. When she flashes her gorgeous smile at her dance partner, it's a moment to mark in her climb to fame. The success of these two musicals inspired MGM to start her out in 1940 in another one, *Two Girls on Broadway*, with George Murphy and Joan Blondell, and this time she *really* dances, particularly in a big production number with Murphy.

Turner was untrained, but she danced well. She could easily have become a dancing star, particularly with the sort of instruction Metro could provide. She didn't sing at all, but then other Metro musical stars didn't sing and were always dubbed (Cyd Charisse and Vera-Ellen, among others, as we've seen). But in thinking it over, MGM bosses asked themselves: Why make Lana Turner into a musical comedy star when we already have Judy Garland, Eleanor Powell, and Jeanette MacDonald? (And they would soon be developing Kathryn Grayson, Cyd Charisse, June Allyson, Esther Williams, Jane Powell, Ann Miller, and others.) Turner's looks and her sexy qualities gave her a dimension of danger and drama that other musical stars didn't have. It was logical for the studio to pull her out of musicals and try her in more dramatic roles.*

Her next movie for 1940 was *We Who Are Young*, a Depression-era story about a young couple who marry, have financial troubles, and almost lose their love for each other. It paired her with the lackluster John Shelton, who was himself under the "can he be a star?" scrutiny. This was his big chance, but he was weak and totally eclipsed by Turner as she has her furniture repossessed, gives birth in a charity ward, keeps her chin up—and, incidentally, passes her drama test with flying colors.

At the end of 1940, MGM reassessed their investment. Turner had been under development for two full years. She was well liked. She was popular with film crews and co-stars, and her reputation as a hard worker was solid. She had been cooperative. She had played leads in weak pictures, meaty roles in stronger pictures, and supporting roles in series films. She had willingly posed for stills, granted interviews, and appeared whenever and wherever she was told. Her distinctive vocal quality, her obvious good looks, and her casting flexibility marked her for full stardom. She seemed ready. The question was, Could she handle the next step? MGM decided to move her up a notch and give her a chance in a big-budget A production. She was put into a movie to be called *Ziegfeld Girl*, and she was billed fourth after James Stewart, Judy Garland, and Hedy Lamarr (in that order). (When Metro said they had “more stars than there were in the heavens,” they weren’t kidding. In 1941, MGM was a studio where Lana Turner had to be billed *fourth*.) As shooting got under way, the day-to-day schedule was carefully scrutinized by the studio bosses, and almost immediately they saw that Turner not only could handle an A-level role, she could eat it alive. Her part was expanded, and the publicity department started pushing her even harder: “The public will soon see Lana Turner in the best role of the biggest picture to be released by the industry’s biggest company within the next few months.” It was official. The studio had told the public that Lana Turner would be a star. They had anointed her.*

During the 1970s, Turner was asked to discuss the “why” of her success in the star system. She said, “There were girls who were prettier, more intelligent, and just as talented. Why didn’t they make it? It’s a question of magic. You have it or you don’t, I guess, and the lucky ones have had it.” Soon enough, MGM would realize that Turner would be a *big* star, not just *a* star, and ultimately, they would learn there was only *one* Lana Turner.

Turner would make a total of four *major* movies in 1941. Today such a thing is impossible. A star might have two movies released in the same year, maybe a third if it were a low-budget indie made earlier and held up for release. But without the efficiency of the

studio system, movies don't get written, financed, made, and released that quickly. At least not movies of the lavishly produced MGM variety like the four Turner appeared in in 1941: besides *Ziegfeld Girl*, there were *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, co-starring her with Spencer Tracy and Ingrid Bergman; *Honky Tonk*, with Clark Gable; and *Johnny Eager*, with Robert Taylor and featuring Van Heflin in an Oscar-winning supporting role. The MGM machine had worked for Lana Turner, and 1941 was the year she became an unqualified star, a "hot property."

Ironically, *Ziegfeld Girl* was a story about three young girls who become stars—or is that human chandeliers?—in the Ziegfeld Follies. Apart from Turner, Judy Garland, and Hedy Lamarr, three "hot properties" in one single film, and Stewart (making his own way up the ladder), the movie features Dan Dailey, Tony Martin, Eve Arden, Charles Winninger, Philip Dorn, Jackie Cooper, as well as delightfully crazy musical numbers from Busby Berkeley. It's a kind of musical *Grand Hotel*, with interwoven plots going in different directions, but with Lana Turner assigned the major dramatic role. It was her first truly demanding performance. "I'm two people," her character says, "neither of them any good." She looks tough and wise one moment, innocent and appealing the next.

MGM, realizing she had first caught the public eye by taking a long walk down a small-town street, cleverly assigned her another long walk—this time down a grand, sweeping staircase in the lobby of a Ziegfeld theatre. It's the film's greatest dramatic moment. A showgirl who's let fame go to her head, now down-and-out, sick and desperate, Turner's character, Sheila attends the opening of the newest Follies, a show she might have headlined if she hadn't ruined her life with booze and high living. Forgotten, she sits alone in the balcony, but her "illness" forces her to leave. She starts walking down the stairs just as *her* music floats out. (The song, "You Stepped Out of a Dream," had been *her* big number.) Pulling herself together like an old soldier hearing the cry to arms, she walks slowly, regally down the stairs in time to the music, dragging a luxurious fur behind her (being down-and-out at MGM doesn't mean you have no furs). Every inch the perfect showgirl, Turner then

suddenly collapses and falls down the stairs to a dramatic death (after a little conversation with some of her co-stars). One big moment like this is all anyone needs, and Turner knew it. By walking along and letting herself bounce in *They Won't Forget*, she had earned herself a chance to become a star. By coming down the stairs in a kind of royal defeat in *Ziegfeld Girl*, she secured top stardom. Throughout Turner's lifetime, she would be written about and discussed, usually in relation to some big scandal. What people usually forgot to write about was that she was a total pro. Whatever the moment, whatever the disaster, whatever the applause or lack of it—both offscreen and on—Turner squared her shoulders and stepped right into it. She rose to the occasion and gave the public what they wanted, all the glamour and excitement it expected. She always went on. If that's not a definition of "star," what is?

After *Ziegfeld Girl*, Turner's salary was raised to \$1,500 a week. *Life* magazine did two major layouts on her within less than eight weeks, and her fan mail was pouring in so fast the studio had to hire extra help. Her luscious beauty easily guaranteed her lots of fan magazine plants and layouts, including, ultimately, the coveted pride of place—her face on the cover. Lana Turner, who loved to pose and was always willing to do it, appeared on as many fan magazine covers in the 1940s as any female star other than Betty Grable. MGM knew they had a big-time movie star they could put in almost anything as long as the sex and glamour were there somewhere. Moviegoers saw in Turner a powerful sex appeal coupled with a basic generosity and kindness. It was best reflected in Clark Gable's description of her: "A man can like her as much as he could love her."

As Lana Turner rose to stardom, she was also getting older. Not necessarily growing up, but getting older. And richer. And more spoiled. Lana liked to have fun, she liked men, and her love life got off to a flashy start. Even in Hollywood, the land of gorgeous and available girls, Lana Turner was exceptional. Men flocked around her. It was inevitable that a serious affair would happen, but no one was quite prepared for her elopement one week after her twentieth birthday.*



Dragging her fur behind her, Lana Turner swept down the stairs and into top stardom in *Ziegfeld Girl* ... just before she fell to her death in the plot.



She met her first husband, Artie Shaw, the lecherous bandleader who also wed Ava Gardner, Kathleen Windsor, and Evelyn Keyes, among others, on the set of *Dancing Co-Ed*. At first she hated him. Then she accepted a date with him and married him that same night. He was her first, but she was his third. The marriage lasted a whole four months and seventeen days, and forever after, Lana Turner referred to it as her “college education.” After this first disastrous marriage, Lana *really* started kicking up her heels. She went out every night and was soon labeled “the Queen of the Nightclubs.” She dated everyone. *Liberty* magazine claimed that between her first and second marriages she “dated, conservatively, 150 members of the opposite sex, was engaged to be married to five different men, and actually was on the verge of going to the altar with a dozen.” The fan mags pictured her with Tony Martin, Robert Stack, Howard Hughes, Victor Mature, Tommy Dorsey, Buddy Rich, Turhan Bey, Robert Hutton, and others. “The poor, lovely dear had so many men after her,” observed actress Marsha Hunt, who had also appeared in *These Glamour Girls*.*

The MGM publicity department now realized that no plants were needed to get Turner into the papers or fan mags. She was more

than able to do that for herself. Turning the pages of any *Photoplay*, *Modern Screen*, or *Screenland* magazines from 1942 onward, one can always find Lana Turner—posing for stills from her movies, modeling the fashions of the day, sharing her recipes, giving out her beauty secrets, conducting canned interviews with hack reporters, being seen with GIs, reading scripts at radio shows, but most of all, dressed up and out on the town. Lana Turner understood glamour and embraced it in her private life in a way few other stars did. In dozens of photos taken at Ciro's, the Mocambo, the Brown Derby, or the Cocoanut Grove, Turner looks sensational. She never wears her hair the same way twice. It may be long and flowing, upswept and severe, rolled into buns over her ears, or in a chignon at the base of her neck, but it's always different. She also never wears the same dress twice and always has fabulous jewelry: the big scatter pins popular in the era, diamond chokers and bracelets, earrings, finger rings. Just when it seems there's nothing left to show off in her jewelry box, she shows up with a simple little black velvet ribbon tied around her neck and upstages herself. She wears hats and gloves and furs and fishnet hair snoods and big cabbage roses and orchids in her hair. Since none of this had to be faked, invented, posed for, or planted, the MGM publicity department loved her—at first.

Meanwhile, Turner received rave reviews for *Ziegfeld Girl*. The film's plot set a pattern that would recur often in her career. *Ziegfeld Girl* meshed what the public knew was going on in Turner's private life with the fictional role she played on-screen, a fusion between real and non-real that would haunt her for life. On-screen, Turner portrayed a playgirl whose life is full of money, fame, and glamour. Offscreen, she appeared to be living the same life. Just as she was seen in the local neighborhood theatres dancing and drinking and saying, "I don't care," wearing mink down to her toes and up to her eyeballs, she was also photographed for real in nightclubs dancing and drinking and wearing furs—and looking very happy about it. It was an intersection of time, place, screen role, and property. At the beginning of the new decade, the public was ready for a new movie face to bring them new movie excitement, and Turner played a big

role in a big movie that was a story about a beautiful young girl going wrong. The public watched her self-destruct on-screen in her hit movie and sat around waiting for the offscreen shoe to drop.



Lana Turner, posed to be pinned up and savored.

It would drop, but not yet. In the meantime, Turner's stardom was made.

MGM rushed her into *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* opposite Spencer Tracy, but oddly cast her as the Victorian ingenue. (It was the last

mistake like that they would make.) The sexy part—the barmaid, Ivy—went to the lustrously beautiful young Ingrid Bergman, who played it to perfection. Turner seems out of place in her bland character, but at least the point of her role was that Dr. Jekyll wants to have sex with her, so he has to turn into Mr. Hyde and do it with Ingrid Bergman. Turner’s other two films were blockbusters, both showcasing her by teaming her with two of MGM’s biggest male stars of the day, Clark Gable and Robert Taylor. It was the final proof that the star machine at MGM knew—and valued—what it had in Lana Turner.

First was Gable. *Honky Tonk* (1941) was a period piece set in the American West of the late 1800s. It’s supposed to be about American frontier empire building, but it’s really only about sex. (The censor must have been out to lunch.) Turner, holding her own in the frame with the King, is a sight to behold, wearing black corsets, diamonds in her hair, and black lace stockings, parading around in front of a leering Gable. In the big scene where Gable breaks down Turner’s bedroom door (à la Rhett Butler in *Gone with the Wind*), a look of childish delight flashes over her face, full of virgin expectation and excitement. The next morning, just like Vivien Leigh in *GWTW*, Turner wakes up happy in bed, luxuriating and stretching her arms. But where *GWTW* made an audience think about what Gable had done for Leigh, *Honky Tonk* made an audience think what Turner had done for Gable.

For *Johnny Eager* (1941), MGM went all out to promote Turner’s sexual magnetism. They hit the public with a lurid advertising campaign: “T-N-T ... TURNER N’ TAYLOR ... they’re dynamite in *Johnny Eager*.” Turner plays a young girl who falls in love with a gangster. She’s on the screen a minimum of time, but her presence haunts the scenes in which she doesn’t appear. Every time a door opens, one hopes she’s out there, waiting to come in. Her long blond hair, her full-breasted body, her wet parted lips—who cares about plot? Turner stands around swathed in mink, with her hair spread out all over the fur in masses of curls, and she steals the movie.*



Turner co-starred with Robert Taylor in *Johnny Eager* (they were billed as “T-N-T”) ... and (below) with John Garfield in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, one of her most iconic roles.



Offscreen, Turner lived up to her image as sexy and glamorous ... and reckless. Less than two years after her divorce from Shaw, Turner met a handsome young man at a nightclub. Before she had known him long—some sources say a month, some say nine days, but Turner herself claims four months—she had eloped with him. It was back to Las Vegas to the same justice of the peace who had wed her to Shaw and who allegedly greeted her with a cheery “Welcome back, Lana!”

No one knew much about this young man, Steve Crane—not even Lana. It was first reported he was a Chicago stockbroker. Then it was said he was a rich tobacco heir, or a Hollywood actor on the make, and finally a young Los Angeles businessman. Turner said afterward that she didn’t know what Crane did for a living and she didn’t care: “I married him without thought, and even if I had pondered for a long time, for ten or fifteen minutes even, I’d have married him anyway.” To her it didn’t matter if he were a tobacco heir or a cigar store Indian; when Lana Turner was in love, details were unimportant. Which turned out to be just as well when Steve Crane was finally discovered to be a young man from Crawfordsville, Indiana, who had at that time what might be termed “limited prospects.”

There was one detail that turned up later, however, that *did* turn out to be important. Shortly after Lana announced she was to become a mother, she learned that Crane had been married before. Furthermore, his marriage had not been dissolved officially at the time he wed Lana Turner. With a baby on the way—and already quarreling with her second husband—Lana Turner found out she wasn’t legally married. She was forced to annul her hasty marriage, but because she was pregnant, hastily remarry! It has been said that, had she not been expecting a child, Lana Turner would never have remarried Steve Crane. In her eyes, their marriage was already hopeless, but under the circumstances, she felt she had little choice.

Turner’s description of this second wedding is pathetic: “Six months with child, in as drab a ceremony as was ever performed, in the heat and squalor of Tijuana, I stood before a little man whose office sign said ‘Legal Matters Adjusted’ and again became Steve

Crane's wife. We called a Mexican off the street for a peso or two and made him a witness." Like some small-town high school girl in trouble, the allegedly spoiled movie star suffered the humiliation of going through with what she knew to be a hopeless deal. Crane had lied to her, and she had fallen for it. Making matters even more dramatic, Turner's only child, Cheryl Christina Crane, born July 26, 1943, was an Rh-negative baby who required special blood transfusions to survive. More headlines and more trauma for Lana.

Most actresses could go a lifetime on a string of publicity like this, but for Turner there was much more to come. By April 1944, she was divorcing Steve Crane. She had married him, annulled him, remarried him, given birth to his child, and divorced him within the space of two years. She was twenty-four years old, a movie star, a mother, and a three-times-married woman with two exes. Even for Hollywood, this was sensational, and MGM wasn't afraid to capitalize on Turner's personal problems. Using the headlines she had made from mid-1943 through 1944, they ruthlessly cast her in a romantic movie titled *Marriage Is a Private Affair* and sat back to enjoy the jokes and gibes—all at Turner's expense—that would make them money and keep the Turner name out there. Since MGM couldn't control her or her bad publicity—and since the public obviously ate it up and wanted more of her—the studio just let it happen. They found a way to use it, exploiting her tragedies (or bad judgment) in the process.

No one fully realized how this might impact Turner's career in the long run. After all, she wasn't the first high-steppin' female star Hollywood had ever seen. And she was young and healthy, and no matter how late she stayed up, she still got to work on time, lines learned and ready to go. Turner was a pro; she did her job. She was known to be a hard worker. She kicked up her heels at night, but not on the set. She *wanted* fame. She *wanted* approval. The publicity department—and her bosses—worried about their investment, but even bad publicity is good publicity, right?

By 1944, MGM no longer felt it necessary to pair Turner opposite big-name male stars. They could now use her to promote men they had in the star machine's grooming process. Thus, *Marriage Is a*

Private Affair co-stars her with two minor leaguers, James Craig and John Hodiak. Compensating for no-name male stars, MGM ensured audience pleasure by giving Turner no less than thirty costume changes. They let her carry the movie, which would be her job from now on. MGM had invested in her. Now she would pay them back. From 1941 to 1946, Turner made a string of hit movies from *Johnny Eager* through *Ziegfeld Girl* and onward through *Somewhere I'll Find You*, *Slightly Dangerous*, *Keep Your Powder Dry*, *Weekend at the Waldorf*, and two “guest appearances”—in *The Youngest Profession* and *DuBarry Was a Lady*. “Guest appearances” were often unbilled, and they were the proof of the top rank of stardom. In a gushing little movie about mindless gaggles of young autograph hunters, *The Youngest Profession* (1943), Turner appeared as herself (along with Greer Garson, Walter Pidgeon, William Powell, and Robert Taylor) as the incredibly kind, generous, and patient movie stars they were—stars who not only give the youngsters their autographs, but also spend time with them sipping tea and helping solve their problems.

Turner’s movies were all well mounted, and she was dressed and coiffed as carefully as any star. Yet overall, her career isn’t full of first-rate films. It is, however, full of great moments, and her next film, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, was going to give her another scene to rank with her two walks. Lana Turner’s entrance in *Postman* is one of the iconic showstoppers in motion picture history. John Garfield, her co-star, sits alone at a lunch counter while behind him a hamburger sizzles. He hears the noise of something being dropped, and looks down to see a lipstick rolling across the floor toward him. The camera tracks back to find its source, locating Lana Turner’s open-toed white pumps as the camera leers up her tanned legs to just above her knees. When the film cuts back to Garfield, he’s stunned and sucks in his breath. A return cut then shows the audience what he can see, all of Lana Turner in her prime, framed in the doorway, wearing very short shorts, a V-neck halter top with a bare midriff, and her trademark turban. Everything she wears is white—stark white against her tanned skin—and she’s holding her compact and waiting for him to deliver her lipstick. He picks it up, but makes her walk to him to retrieve it. Then she turns her back on

him, slowly goes back to the door, turns to the side, and sensuously, tauntingly, smears her lipstick on while he watches. She shows him what she's got, then walks out, slamming the door behind her. During this scene, there is one cut to Turner in medium close-up, sparkling with all the youth, glamour, and sex appeal any actress could have, and she lets the audience know she sees what he sees and knows what he wants—and she'll use it. When Lana Turner preened in front of John Garfield, an entire nation drooled.

Postman was loaded with as much hot sex as the studio felt it could get away with in the 1940s, and the on-screen chemistry between Turner and Garfield generated real heat. When they play Latin music on the jukebox and dance close on a steamy summer night, the shadowed room lit only by an outside neon sign makes anything—including murder—seem not only possible but downright necessary. The link between sex and violence that MGM had exploited innocently enough in *Honky Tonk* and more specifically in *Johnny Eager* (and which would be later fully associated with her private life) is disturbingly explicit. In a stunning scene in Garfield's room, Turner lures his hapless character into murdering her husband. She is presented in a close-up that is an image of Satan as a beautiful woman, electric with evil. Eyebrows arched with tension, mouth half parted, voice seductively whispering, Turner is photographed with a silvery magnetism that adds glamour to the shock of what she is saying. The kittenish girl of her earlier career is nowhere in sight.

Postman took her to a new level. Like Betty Grable's pinup photo and Rita Hayworth's "Put the Blame on Mame" number in *Gilda*, Lana Turner's first appearance, all in white, in *Postman* made her a legend in her own time. She went beyond MGM's plans for her. She became more than a movie star. She became part of America's culture. Linking her fully ripened sexuality to her lurid offscreen publicity through roles like Cora in *Postman*, MGM had elevated Turner into one of the greatest sex symbols of the 1940s. Now it was no longer a case of a business creating roles for someone they had developed to be typecast. It was a case of dealing with a phenomenon who was deeply associated with sexual allure, danger,

and a level of glamour few movie stars could acquire. The combination of her private life, with all its peccadilloes, and her role as a temptress pushed Turner over the top.

It was now 1946. Lana Turner had been a star since 1941. Whenever the movies wanted to invoke a symbol for their own particular brand of sex appeal (whether the movies were made by MGM or a rival studio), it was Lana Turner's name that was used. She is mentioned in *Cairo* (1942), *Lucky Jordan* (1942), *Meet the People* (1944; a boat is named the *Lana Turner*), *Anchors Aweigh* (1945), and even Tom and Jerry cartoons. In Goldwyn's *Wonder Man* (1945), a girl on a park bench justifies her looks by saying, "Some people think I look like Lana Turner." In *Without Reservations* (1946), directed by her old mentor, Mervyn LeRoy, for RKO, her name is mentioned so often it's as if she had stock in the picture. ("Lana Turner?" says a character. "That's a glandular attraction.") She herself was asked by MGM to make a cameo appearance to bolster a little joke they created for Red Skelton in *DuBarry Was a Lady* (1943). Skelton does a musical number entitled "I Love an Esquire Girl" which has the line, "and if Lana Turner doesn't set your brain awirl," and to his surprise, Lana herself takes his arm and walks him off camera. This popularity made Lana Turner a national treasure during World War II. A GI allegedly wrote to his mother that "somehow it is better to be fighting *for* Lana Turner than it is to be fighting the Greater Reich." It was a sentiment even the Germans could understand. President Franklin D. Roosevelt invited her to his annual birthday ball, and when she left early to go dancing elsewhere, he was heard to sigh, "I wish I were going along." Everybody in those years had the "Lana Turner Blues," a silly song written by two soldiers: "I get the morning papers bright and early / I gotta know where I can see that girly / 'Cause since that night at the corner movie, I've got those Lana Turner blues."

Turner was also everywhere in print: newspapers, newsmagazines, women's magazines. She inspired purple prose outside the hype of the business itself. Writing in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Geoffrey McBain gushed, "What is a Lana Turner? *Who* is a Lana Turner? Lana Turner is a name in lights on a thousand

grubby Main Streets. Lana Turner is a long, low libidinous whistle on the wetted lips of America ... She is the pickup a guy will never stop hoping to make until senility overtakes him. She is the girl a girl can always think she is until the house lights come up. She is love with a stranger; the girl you didn't marry; the chapter Havelock Ellis forgot to write; and she is yours whenever you want her, for forty cents plus tax ... She is, in short, a Hollywood press release come to life." It was a lot for an uneducated, untrained girl from Idaho to live up to.

Of course, Turner was still an employee under contract and had to keep on working for MGM to continue the professional bargain she had made when they turned her into a movie star. Next she went into *Green Dolphin Street* (1947), a film set in the 1800s on an island in the English Channel and in an untamed New Zealand. It is *Gone with the Wind* epic: big, sprawling, and telling so many stories at once that the audience is exhausted as well as entertained. Lana Turner and Donna Reed play sisters Marianne and Marguerite, like a beautiful Tweedledum and Tweedledee ("Bless my soul if they aren't a pretty pair of fish!" comments one observer). Turner's character (Marianne) is a modern girl, bold, scheming, determined to take over the family shipping business and even, by her own admission, "not quite nice." By now, Turner's reputation demanded this aspect of all her characters.

Green Dolphin Street contains enough events to fill five movies: an earthquake (during which Lana gives birth), a tidal wave, a native uprising, and a flood. The big earthquake sequence features trees uprooting and crashing on native heads, geysers gushing, earth cracking, opening, and swallowing people—and Lana screeching her head off in childbirth. If a faint tinge of the mechanical creeps into her performance from time to time, it's no more than the script deserves. The real excitement associated with this movie was generated offscreen. During its filming, Turner made headlines when she suspended production to fly to Mexico to visit her current lover.

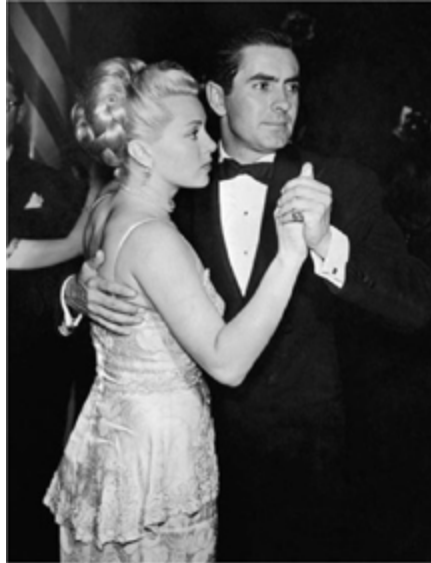
If she had been jaunting off to visit some ordinary guy, the press might have given it a couple of inches in the back of the paper. But

this time, as much as with any of her boyfriends, they grabbed hold and revved up the boldface headlines. This was because Lana's lover was Tyrone Power.

Lana Turner and Tyrone Power were the female and male equivalents of the studio system's basic concept of "movie star": the perfect figures to create the swoon, the loyal fan club, the interest of moviegoers of all ages, and, of course, the comforting sound of hard cash dropping into the coffers. In the world of the drop-dead gorgeous, Lana and Ty dropped audiences deadlier than practically anyone else, partly because their looks were exceptional but not overly exotic. They weren't Greta Garbo or Rudolph Valentino. They could be the prettiest girl and handsomest boy in town—elevated to the highest physical level, but still with at least a touch of reality about them.

Lana and Ty (or Ty and Lana) were a union of movie god and movie goddess, the perfect casting of a blond-blond glamour girl and a dark-haired, sensual leading man. If a movie star had a romance with another movie star, the studio machines could really go into high gear, because usually a movie star took up with a lesser actor (Joan Crawford and Phillip Terry), a boring doctor (Claudette Colbert and Dr. Joel Pressman), or someone too unphotogenic, too outspoken, or just plain too something that would be hard to make work in the fan magazines. There were some minor nuggets for the flacks: Betty Grable married her equal in the bandleader power of Harry James. Marilyn Monroe would marry another genuine legend, sports star Joe DiMaggio (and then playwright Arthur Miller), and lesser light Laraine Day married Leo "the Lip" Durocher. Sometimes there were show business couples who were balanced in mid-level glory—Ida Lupino and Howard Duff, June Haver and Fred MacMurray, Lucy and Desi before TV. But not often did star power unite with other real star power. Exceptions were the original show business couple and grand champions, Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford; Robert Taylor and Barbara Stanwyck, a couple who tried to keep out of the news; and Clark Gable and Carole Lombard, a marriage that ended all too soon when she died in a plane crash. But a Turner-Power romance for the 1940s gossip columnists and movie

flacks was high wattage. Their respective studios smelled money, and as nervous as the union made their bosses in terms of incompatibility, longevity, common sense, and potential arguments over which studio would get to put them together in a movie first, they backed the romance all the way.



Lana and Ty ... Ty and Lana ... out on the town at the Mocambo (*above*) ... and (*right*) at the peak of their red-hot affair, behind the scenes while he was making *Captain from Castile*.



Naturally, Ty and Lana knew each other. Hollywood was a small town in those days, and neither was the stay-at-home type. More than once they probably bumped into one another on the dance floor or saw each other across a crowded room. They did not, of course, see each other during the working day. Turner was sequestered at Metro and never loaned out during her heyday, and the same was true for Power, who was at Fox. (Power's one loan-out to Metro, for *Marie Antoinette* in 1938, preceded Turner's arrival.)

How and when they first began "seeing" each other has never been documented, although differing opinions have been put forth. In his biography of Power, Fred Guiles says, "Evie Wynn had brought them together, even though they had been acquaintances for many years." In her autobiography, Turner wrote, "I had always been attracted to him, but I kept my distance because he was married. One night he invited me over for drinks." (She discreetly adds, "What an evening!") Turner discusses their romance fully, but in that maddening way that movie stars who write about their lives inevitably share, doesn't pinpoint the time in which they were

together. (In a star's mind, time is a flowing river that everyone else is responsible for keeping straight, and besides, a date spelled out is a possible revelation of one's age.)

What everyone knows is that sometime after World War II—before Power made *Nightmare Alley*, according to Turner—and mid-August 1946, according to Power, and during the months of January 1947 to November 1947, according to the fan magazines—Tyrone Power and Lana Turner began a much-publicized romance.

Fan magazines in those days had a long lead time—three months or more. This often left them with considerable egg on their faces as stars could marry and divorce in that time, much less conduct an affair. The mags did their best, but their coverage was a bit late, vague in the early stages, and behind the times when things ended. (This makes it even harder to figure out what happened.) The magazines carry no mention of Lana and Ty from the middle of 1946 almost to the end of the year. Some after-the-fact chroniclers say Lana was shooting *Postman* when the romance began, others say it was *Green Dolphin Street* or *Cass Timberlane* (1947). (One definite fact is that she left the set of *Green Dolphin Street* to fly to Mexico to visit Power on the set of *Captain from Castile*.) Any information in a gossip column is subject to suspicion, and the differences between shooting dates and release dates for movies often cause historical confusion. However, in the January 1947 issue of *Photoplay*,* their affair was obviously on the burner. “Inside Stuff,” the magazine’s gossip column, written by the anonymous “Cal York,” carries an item that says Power and Annabella have announced their divorce because he “likes the simple life” and she is a “woman of the world” who prefers “big parties and gaiety.” The magazine says rumors about Power’s love life “clutter the Hollywood grapevine,” but that “Gene Tierney is the girl” according to the uninformed. Not considering himself a part of the uninformed, “Cal York” lets everyone know that this rumor is untrue and that the true rumor is “Lana Turner is the girl in Tyrone’s life.” Hedging his bets, the columnist adds, “Don’t ask us to predict—not on this one!” The combination of the much-sought-after Power and the volatile Turner was one no experienced writer on the Hollywood scene was going to

risk a reputation on. As soon as the news broke, the fan magazines went flat out warp speed. Everyone was off and running to write it while it was hot. Louella Parsons was out in front, telling everyone that Lana and Ty were an item, “an unbelievably handsome pair” that “had so much to give one another, Ty with his gentleness and well-bred ways, Lana with her verve, her loveliness, her almost childlike sensuality.”

The year 1947 was full of the Lana-Ty romance. On a single day, May 5, 1947, these items were released to newspapers by the studio publicity mills, the various gossip columnists, and various press agents about town: “Ty Power and Lana Turner are coming out in the open and were seen having dinner at the Chanticleer ... Lana Turner gave Tyrone Power a birthday party Monday night, and believe me, this romance seems to grow stronger ... Lana Turner and Ty Power created a sensation when they walked into the MGM commissary together. Ty spent all day with Lana on the *Cass Timberlane* set ... Lana Turner and Tyrone Power continue to be the most romantic couple in town ... LT and TP at Pebble Beach ... LT in love with TP ...” Their photographs were in every magazine and newspaper, and breathless articles on them as individuals, as a couple, and as mates for others were rushed into print. Lana and Ty in full nightclub regalia were, obviously, a photo op to top any other photo op available. There they were dancing at Ciro’s, Lana dressed all in white with diamonds in her hair, Ty in a tuxedo, holding her in his arms. There they were at the racetrack, both in tweeds, and at the Brown Derby, heads together over big salads. They were photographed at movie premieres, the skating rink, Mocambo’s, and on the sets of their various movies. As Lana steps out of a limo with Ty’s help, she’s suited up in full star glamour, with white fur, open-toed high heels, and jewels dripping. Ty is right behind her, wearing top hat and tails. They were all over the place and all over each other. Someone in Hollywood once defined “the most beautiful sight he had ever seen” as his view of Lana and Ty, both wearing white bathing suits, deeply tanned, and full of delight and energy, chasing each other down a stretch of Malibu beach. Looking at the photographs of them today, surrounded by hordes of autograph

seekers, her white furs sliding off her shoulders as she scribbles and his arm around her while he accepts his own proffered paper for signature, one is struck by how they truly look like characters in a movie about Hollywood. No one even remotely believed in their undying love, of course. They were alone in their fantasy. The poor babies look so happy in their photos, and they don't even know that their romance was over before it started.*

And then came the beginning of the end of Ty and Lana (or Lana and Ty). The November 1947 issue of *Modern Screen* has two spectacular photos of Lana on its cover, wearing one rare orchid (on a white, slim satin gown) and posed behind a gigantic blow-up of another one. The article, entitled "Golden Girl" and written by Kaaren Pieck, is a complete chronicle of Lana's various loves. Accompanying the final photo—one of Lana and Ty (in black and white, no longer worthy of full color)—the first ominous caption appears: "Something new has been added (a reduction of Power to the latest in a long line of other beaus), and insiders are betting this time Lana means it when she says she loves Ty Power." This was fan mag double talk for "as we all now know, this is just another romance no matter what she says." By April 1948, the same magazine carries an article called "If this isn't love ... the story of Tyrone Power and Linda Christian." Lana Turner's name is nowhere mentioned in the piece, which predicts that Power and Christian will wed. (They did.)

What went wrong? No one knows, but there are many rumors: Lana was even more possessive than Annabella, and Ty couldn't stand it. Ty was easily bored, and his eye roved on to others. Lana was addicted to amphetamines, and Ty hated that. Ty was cruel to Lana and made her abort their child. Et cetera. The only facts everyone can agree on have to do with the highly publicized "surprise" visit Turner made to Ty in Mexico. Turner took a big risk by flying down to see her lover, since she was heavily into production on *Green Dolphin Street*. If anything happened, she would hold up production and cost her studio thousands of dollars. But Lana being Lana, she risked all for love, seizing a weekend to have an overnight tryst. Something seems to have gone wrong during or

after this visit—possibly *before*, which might have been why she made the effort. At any rate, soon afterward, the big romance was over.

Their romance was the twilight of the movie gods, but while it lasted, it was a glorious moment in movie star history. Other movie couples that followed them—Debbie and Eddie, Tony and Janet—were examples of those “down-home,” “we’re just real people” movie stars. They had kids and posed with baby strollers and diapers while rustling up some eggs in the kitchen. They consciously removed themselves from the hothouse stardom of Lana and Ty. By the time the last really big star love affairs hit, the system that fostered the glamour of Lana and Ty would be dead. As for today’s lot—the J-Los and Bens, even the Brads and Angelinas—they are definitely Kmart couples compared to Lana and Ty. (Even Liz and Dick, who wrote the book on the category, don’t count because they were stalked by paparazzi outside the old studio system.)

It was left to Turner, who outlived Power by thirty-seven years, to write a version of their story. In her autobiography, *Lana: The Lady, the Legend, the Truth*, Turner said the love she had always longed for she found in Tyrone Power, “the most gentlemanly, enchanting man I have ever known.” All her life, Turner remained convinced that had Power been able to settle his divorce quickly enough, they would definitely have married. Her account of their romance has a suspicious women’s-film quality. She writes a movie for them: “An electric current flowed between us. You had only to look at us to know we were in love. And we made a breathtaking couple.” According to her, they shared a love of “music and books” and planned to make a film together based on Mildred Cram’s romantic novel *Forever*.

Despite her soap-opera descriptions of long walks and happy games of croquet, Turner shrewdly zeroes in on Power. “Like me, Tyrone was a prisoner of the romantic appearance that had made him a screen idol. I sympathized with his need to prove himself in roles of greater depth.” According to Turner, when she became pregnant, things began to come apart. “Two careers were on the line here, two big careers.” But her definitive statement about her

romance with Tyrone Power was: “In my life I loved other men, but Tyrone was special. He was the one who broke my heart.” Guiles pointed out that they both had come from broken homes with dominant mother figures in the background and that they had “much in common.” He speculates that both needed to be surrounded by close friends and feel supported by associates, but that, conversely, both of them were very private people, “loners in a very real sense.” His definition of their closest bond was that they were “both sensualists.” (What they both really were was movie stars.)

When Turner had returned to *Green Dolphin*, one of life’s ironies occurred. Working on her set in a small role as a native girl was a beautiful young newcomer named Linda Christian. When Power went to Rome in 1948, he began dating Christian, and she became his second wife in January 1949. Publicity people, easily turned in a new direction, called it “the Wedding of the Century.” Power and Christian were married in a tenth-century Roman Catholic church, and during the enormous hoopla, back in America Turner rapidly moved on to her next. But while it lasted, the Power-Turner romance was a union made in fan heaven. For a romance that was covered by the press for every moment of its duration, there is a curious absence of any hard facts. Even the people who knew them well have never agreed on the curious case of the two glamorous movie stars and their fabled 1947 love affair. What is known is that it happened and it ended. Tyrone Power married Linda Christian. Lana Turner married Bob Topping. And the business went on.

The curious result of the Ty and Lana shenanigans was that it was Lana Turner who paid. The romance hurt her reputation, not his. She was viewed as unreliable. *She* had jeopardized the budget and filming schedule of *her* movie by recklessly flying off to see her lover in Mexico. *She* had pursued him, and *he* had jilted her. *He* was just another whim in *her* long line of lovers. Ever so subtly, the double standard was applied to Lana Turner’s romance with Tyrone Power, and from that time on, her publicity became more negative. The press began to present her as a spoiled, reckless wanton who was having an affair while unwed and—worst of all—who just

didn't care about decent behavior. Although it was the forthcoming Johnny Stompanato crisis that took Turner to the bottom, her prior romance with Tyrone Power marks the beginning of her publicity decline.

Perhaps to stabilize her image (not to mention generate some pizzazz at the box office), MGM cast Turner with two former co-stars who were two of their biggest names. (It's also possible that these two men, who were aging, could use the boost her sex appeal would bring to their own careers.) First was *Cass Timberlane* (1947) with Spencer Tracy and next was *Homecoming* (1948) with Clark Gable. Turner and Tracy are good together. Although seemingly an odd couple, they have fun with each other. He is the wise old man who can appreciate what she's got, and she's a wisened-up young girl who can give him what he deserves. (Turner collapses in giggles while Tracy tickles her and appreciatively eyes her in tight jeans.) Turner's role seems to restore some of the kittenish fun of her first years at Metro, as she plays softball and appears to be down-to-earth. At the same time, it weaves in what Turner now represents to people. She becomes restless as Tracy's wife and embarks on a would-be affair with Zachary Scott.

Homecoming was her third movie with Gable. A mature and touching film, it is a story about the adjustments married couples had to make to separation during World War II. Gable plays a society doctor for whom a country club dance is more important than helping the poor. Anne Baxter is that familiar soap-opera creature, the doctor's wife, wearing fur and pearls and standing nobly by the cocktail shaker, keeping the chintz curtains fresh while he fights the war. Turner's role is a down-to-earth nurse with a crusading spirit, a decidedly deglamorized role with no wardrobe but a pair of battle fatigues. She's a noble spirit, but she falls for a married man—so she dies.

The old Turner-Gable magic is still present, only now they are equals. Turner is no longer the little girl flirting deliciously with the King. Now she is Lana Turner, his equal in star magnitude and sexual magnetism. The postwar Gable was older looking, sadder faced, but he is warmed up and teased by the laughing Turner, who

is still easy and natural in front of the cameras. She was still the right kind of fun-loving companion for Gable. When they go out to bathe in a Roman ruin, he's shy and she's bold, a good reversal of their former screen selves. In a scene redolent of wartime democracy, the director (Turner's old friend Mervyn LeRoy) plays two of America's biggest sex symbols for laughs, treating them like human beings, real people, instead of movie stars.

Not everyone had LeRoy's sense of what to do with Turner, however. She was becoming difficult to cast. Magnetic and disturbing, she had become a powerful image. An undercurrent of violence and recklessness (which seemed fatally linked to her sex appeal) became more overt. By now MGM realized fully that Lana Turner was not simply a product of their system. She was "Lana," a name that despite her popularity never caught on as a name for babies. What sensible mother wanted a "Lana" on her hands? Turner was no role model.

This was a part of her movie star development that hadn't been fully envisioned by the studio bosses. Lana Turner had become a household name, which wasn't itself unusual for a movie star, but she was a household name associated with questionable offscreen behavior, a complicated personal life, and a devotion to glamour that seemed just a little too much for the average person to condone. Audiences wrote in to complain about her "morality." MGM solved this problem by casting her as a villainess. As a change of pace, she played Milady deWinter in a lavish costume drama based on Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* (1948). Turner does full justice to the juicy role of a truly evil woman. ("Beware of strange men, dark roads, and lonely places. That woman will destroy you.") Except for her brief appearance in *DuBarry Was a Lady*, *Musketeers* was her first Technicolor film. Fans turned out in droves to see their girl in living color—a sight worth waiting for.*

By then Turner had become indifferent to filmmaking. She began to fight MGM, initially going on suspension over her role as Milady, refusing to play in the lavish costume drama. Studio pressure convinced her to cooperate, however, although Louis B. Mayer was rumored to be almost wishing he were rid of her and the ongoing

hoo-hah of her private life. Mayer had stayed calm through her early romantic escapades, but in 1948 she garnered even more negative headlines in a sensational affair with the much-married millionaire Bob Topping. When she announced her intention to marry Topping (her third), the press rose to the occasion like barracuda to the bait. Suddenly, she became a figure of their ridicule. They mockingly described Lana as having been “desolate after her divorce,” as she had been “left with nothing but her \$226,000 per year salary, a daughter named Cheryl, and half a dozen casual beaux.” Turner’s groom was scathingly referred to by *Life* magazine as “considered very talented by café society ... because he inherited \$7 million and plays a fine game of golf.”

Paying no attention, Turner happily married Topping in May 1948, following completion of *Musketeers*. The wedding itself was thoroughly mocked by *Life* in a story entitled “For the Fourth and Definitely Last Time.”* Turner’s lifelong friend Billy Wilkerson acted as host for the reception and also as Topping’s best man. Completely ignoring his close connection with Turner and her career, *Life* pointed out that Wilkerson “moved in upper circles by virtue of having risen from speakeasy manager to publisher of the *Hollywood Reporter*—an expert on marriages, having engaged in five of them himself.”

Despite the media’s cruelty and cynicism, the bride was starry-eyed and beautiful. Wearing champagne lace, fortified with a \$30,000 trousseau by Don Loper, standing in front of a bower covered with nine dozen gardenias and her daughter Cheryl as flower girl, Turner did as she always did. She went forward confidently. “This is forever,” Bob Topping was heard to remark to her. “Yes, darling,” she replied.

Obviously not needing money, Turner took the first vacation from work she had known since she was barely sixteen years old. She was off the screen some time, returning partly out of boredom, partly out of studio pressure, and partly, it was said, out of disillusionment with her latest marriage. Looking tense and overweight, she returned to MGM, but not until she had divorced

Bob Topping in December 1952 after officially separating from him in July 1951.

Turner's first film after her return, panned at the time and even disowned by its director, George Cukor, is an unexpectedly mature story and suggests that her career could have taken on new depth. *A Life of Her Own* (1950) both uses the conventions of the woman's film and works against them, letting darkness and despair settle over its plot like a great blight. As model Lily James, Turner creates a character that everyone could see was closely identified with her offscreen self. By virtue of hard work and determination—not to mention the looks of a Lana Turner—Lily James makes it to the top of the cat-eat-cat New York modeling world. She is no starry-eyed kid, and she has no interest in romance: "I've had men buzzing around me since I was fourteen years old. I want to be somebody. All I have is myself and how I look. I'll work hard." To her fans, Turner seemed to be talking to them about herself.

Still beautiful, if looking slightly more mature, Turner now had to face the problems of the Hollywood studio system's impending collapse. She was a top star and a big box office attraction, yet *A Life of Her Own* didn't fare well financially. Furthermore, the bosses of MGM now really understood they had created a monster. By ruthlessly exploiting her personal troubles and incorporating what the public learned about her offscreen life into her screen roles, they had inadvertently painted Turner into a corner. And she wasn't getting any younger. Suddenly, she had nowhere to go in movies except into roles in which she played an actress, a star, a terribly rich woman, a sinner. No *Come Back, Little Sheba* or putting on a false nose and playing a female Cyrano for her. She could now be cast *only* as Lana Turner, the fusion of reel/real icon she had become. It was no longer possible for the public to see her as anything but her image. Realizing they were carrying an expensive, hard-to-cast, potentially scandal-causing aging star on their rosters, MGM began making long-range plans to dump her.

Before giving up on their investment entirely, MGM first tried to restore a lighthearted quality to Turner's image. They returned her to musicals. The first of these is a candidate for the worst film she

ever made while under contract at MGM, a farce called *Mr. Imperium* (1951). Turner played (surprise!) a Hollywood movie star opposite Ezio Pinza, the opera singer who had made a romantic splash in Broadway's *South Pacific*. Before *Mr. Imperium* could ruin her forever, she was rapidly cast in a musical film that was, whatever its imperfections, far superior to the Pinza debacle. MGM's 1952 version of the durable *Merry Widow* is the Neiman Marcus of film musicals. It's stuffed with expensive furniture, gold-trimmed uniforms, sterling-silver place settings, ostrich-feathered costumes, and jeweled knickknacks. This version of *The Merry Widow*, pairing Lana Turner with the handsome Fernando Lamas, was not like the von Stroheim version, with its decadence and sense of European rot. Nor was it like the 1934 version directed by Ernst Lubitsch and starring Jeanette MacDonald and Maurice Chevalier. *That* film was all bubbles and wit, as sophisticated and subtle as only Lubitsch can be. But although this version may not be vintage champagne, it isn't beer either. More of a good red, with plenty of body and a good pedigree. There are those who feel that the Turner version of *The Merry Widow* is more fizz than fizz, but in terms of beauty of production, it excels. Visions of the dancers at Maxim's, gorgeous in scarlet and brilliant black, and the pink, white, and gold of the waltzers in a spectacular final number linger in a viewer's memory. The public turned the film into a semi-hit, although critics joked that since Turner had just divorced Topping, the title should have been *The Merry Grass Widow*.



One of Turner's best roles was that of, what else, a famous movie star, in *The Bad and the Beautiful* with Kirk Douglas.

Turner's next film performance might be called the best she ever gave. It was the film that MGM was built to make and Vincente Minnelli was meant to direct. It might even be the role that Lana Turner was born to play: movie star Georgia Lorrison in *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952). It is superbly directed by Minnelli, a man who *knew* Hollywood. He re-creates atmosphere—a typical Hollywood party, a sneak preview, shots of hundreds of different types of staircases stored in a studio warehouse, a two-bit agent who breaks down and weeps when his client lands a job, and a fast-talking sharpie who rents leopard costumes. ("Plenty of fright. You'll need to add shoulder pads, of course.") Turner was given top billing in an impressive cast that included Kirk Douglas, Dick Powell, Walter Pidgeon, Barry Sullivan, Gloria Grahame, and Gilbert Roland. Since the public's idea of the private Lana Turner was now fixed as a

spoiled glamour girl with an excessive love life, audiences easily believed her as Lorrison. In addition, the part itself, loosely based on the life of Diana Barrymore, was one Turner could give everything she had—and she did. Her Georgia is a lush with one foot in the gutter when she meets Jonathan Shields (Kirk Douglas), a Hollywood hustler who has gate-crashed and gambled his way into picture power. Georgia is the kind of girl who is willing to sleep with Shields just because it's 4:00 a.m. and she wants to turn the light out. However, he sees her potential: "When you're on the screen, no matter how bad you are, no one looks at anyone but you."

Lana Turner is excellent in *The Bad and the Beautiful*. For once, a glamorous movie star is played by one. She understands the role, and she makes it hers. Yet she wasn't nominated for an Oscar, and MGM refused to reconsider her potential. It was *the* moment for her—if recognized as the actress she might have become, things could have changed. But no. Despite her success in *The Bad and the Beautiful*, MGM persisted in its plan to make Turner into a musical comedy star and lighten her image. Her next, *Latin Lovers* (1953), was supposed to be a comedy with a little music—a dollop of whipped cream atop a fizzy soda. What resulted was more like a Bromo-Seltzer, with no relief in sight.

From her return to the screen in *A Life of Her Own* through *Latin Lovers*, Turner had been cast as a top photographer's model, a movie star (twice), and a very, very rich woman (twice). (In *Latin Lovers* she had allegedly inherited \$37 million, which did a lot for her wardrobe changes.) There wasn't any way to present Lana Turner as a nice girl at a soda fountain anymore. For her remaining movies at MGM, she would be: the kind of bad girl who is euphemistically called "an adventuress" but who is picked up on the streets to give some clarification; a Damaskan goddess of love; a shady lady with a mink and a past; a man-hunting British lady; and a mistress of King Henry II. Such roles would be her fate until she left MGM in 1956. She would be always sexy, never ordinary, never very human, and always connected to scandal. MGM had shaped her and let her

private life define her. Now they couldn't figure out any other way to go.

Several major Hollywood stars (Gene Kelly, among others) were now going overseas to make films and take advantage of a new American tax law. The studios, too, were interested in filming in Europe, both for the box office draw of location shooting and to use their own frozen foreign funds in film production. Turner joined the parade of big-name stars who made films overseas, going first to Italy for *The Flame and the Flesh*, and then to Holland and England for *Betrayed*. Accompanying her on this sojourn was the handsome actor who would become her next husband, Lex Barker. ("We're just good friends," said Lana and Lex as they departed California.) *The Flame and the Flesh* (1954) gave fans a brunette Lana Turner in a film that attempted to capture the lustiness of the popular foreign films then flooding the United States movie houses. It was shot largely in Naples, and its location footage was the best thing about it.

Turner was then reunited with her popular co-star Clark Gable for the fourth and last time in her next film, *Betrayed* (1954). The main betrayal is by the screenplay, which badly lets down its two durable stars. Turner and Gable seem tired, unable to generate their former sexual magnetism. Although she hasn't aged since *Homecoming*, he definitely has. They look at each other with dull eyes, their former secret twinkles and sense of mutual fun gone. He's no longer the tomcat on the prowl and she's not the cute, kittenish kid. Alas, they don't even seem to be Clark Gable and Lana Turner. They look like two people who just want to get it over with, put their feet up, and have a cup of coffee.*

After a long "companionship," Turner took Lex Barker as her next husband on September 8, 1953, and, just to make sure it would last, wed him again in a big Christmas ceremony on December 25. (She would divorce him in June 1957 and learn years later that he had sexually abused her daughter.*)

Next for the sinking Turner would be one of those films that inspire critics to think they're comedians. *The Prodigal* (1955) is ready-made for the one-line put-down, and Turner's role is one of

the silliest in film history. It was the fate of most Hollywood sex symbols to eventually be cast as a goddess. Rita Hayworth played Terpsichore and Ava Gardner played Venus, but these roles were in light musical comedies. Turner was saddled with playing the High Priestess of Astarte back in old Damascus (700 B.C.) in a script that thought it was for real. It can only be to Turner's professional credit that, knowing the film was a joke, she suited up in her goddess beads and walked through her role, giving the film all her glamour but none of herself. Her entrance is another one of her great movie walks. To the jangle of pagan music, she appears from behind a gaudy curtain and, with torches in her hands, undulates around a claustrophobic tent wearing baubles, bangles, and beads. "She is not a follower of Jehovah," hisses a witness, by way of explanation.

The design of *The Prodigal* gives the impression of various studio departments struggling to create the world of 700 B.C. and forgetting to communicate with one another. Turner is dressed like a cooch dancer, and Louis Calhern, the grand factotum of the temple, is dressed like a Victorian lampshade. Turner and the little girl she is training to take her place as high priestess wear matching outfits—mother-daughter goddess costumes. The scriptwriters have strung together a list of lines from other biblical epics and let it go at that. "I can never belong to any one man," says Turner. "I belong to... *all* men." ("She's what every blind man sees," one slave sagely observes to another.)

For all its idiocy, *The Prodigal* nevertheless silences laughter at the awful moment when Lana Turner, as the ultimate sex goddess, is pelted with rotten vegetables and stoned by the populace. She is bewildered and hurt, having believed "her people" would always love her. With a sudden movement, she jumps from a high tower into a flaming cauldron below, a human sacrifice to those who have elevated her but no longer care. No movie star needs a scene like that, particularly when it can be read as mirroring her real situation.

Watching Lana Turner clack across a marble floor in modern high heels, and seeing her move among "her people" like a movie star among her fans, audiences can't help but wonder. Casting a star

like Turner this way must have seemed like a great idea to someone, but what about *her*? How did she feel when, having proved she could act, she was assigned roles like this?

MGM had always had a solidly bankable property in their golden girl. Not once since Mervyn LeRoy first brought her through the gates had they ever loaned her to another studio. Now, with her films not doing as well as before, Metro made a deal for Turner's services, loaning her out twice. She was to make *The Sea Chase* for Warners and *The Rains of Ranchipur* at 20th Century-Fox. *The Sea Chase* (1955) teamed her for the first time with John Wayne. Toe to toe, they were equals in star magnitude. Head to head, they were not as well matched, as tiny Turner (even in her highest heels) barely grazed the big Duke's shoulder. Wayne knows, as always, what he is doing, and Turner, swathed in mink, blond and blue-eyed, wearing a low-cut, clinging gown as she stands in the doorway of Wayne's quarters, tries her best. Her face wears a look that seems to be saying, "Me Turner. You Wayne." The two stars try, but there's no real chemistry between them. Together in the frame they look like a bad splice job, seeming to come from two different movies.

Turner didn't fare much better at Fox with *The Rains of Ranchipur* (1955).^{*} A remake of *The Rains Came* in color and wide screen, *Ranchipur* afforded her little except some lovely costume changes.

Following these loan-outs, Turner returned to Metro to make her last picture under contract to the studio. *Diane* (1955) was a sumptuous costume picture based on the life of the Countess de Brézé, the infamous Diane de Poitiers. There is wealth in every tiny detail. A fruit bowl in the shape of a black swan. Handsome carved screens. Lovely tapestries. Oranges hollowed out into little baskets and filled with strawberries. And, of course, Turner, wearing so much fur that she's practically an ecological disaster. The elegance and polish she had acquired in her years at Metro enable her to pull herself—and the cast—through the film. The part of Diane is one of those cleavage-and-catastrophe roles for which her regal carriage is perfect. By the end of her sojourn at Metro, Turner is no longer an

elevator girl who wants to wear mink. She may be Queen of the Gypsies, but she is a queen.

The reaction to *Diane* was not good, and Lana Turner faced a major career crisis. After more than eighteen years as a top moneymaker (her films had grossed over \$50 million), MGM dropped her contract. (After all, the business didn't expect a female movie star to last more than ten years, and MGM had been coping with Lana for more than fifteen.) In February 1956, shortly after her thirty-sixth birthday, Lana Turner left the studio that had been both her schoolroom and her home, kicked out of the big nest she had helped to feather. For the first time, she was a star without a home studio to protect her and promote her. "I didn't know how to make a hotel or airline reservation," said Turner. "For a long time I waited for my limousine that never came to pick me up. I was an orphan. MGM had prepared me for stardom, but not for life."

How did Lana Turner feel about her change in status? Was she frightened or was she worried? "You know those little toys they have for children?" Turner said. "The ones that bounce back when you hit them? That's me." Producer Jerry Wald, searching for an actress with a box office name to head the cast in his planned production of *Peyton Place* (1957),* offered Turner the important role of Constance MacKenzie. MacKenzie was the mother of a teenage daughter, and Turner's friends advised her not to start playing mother roles because it would destroy her glamour image. Turner wisely felt otherwise. She sensibly pointed out that, after all, she *was* the mother of a teenager and everyone knew it. Besides, why should Lana Turner worry about playing a mother? She looked enough like a teenager herself to let would-be critics say anything they could. And she needed to work.

With characteristic good humor, Lana flashed a smile and gave out her optimistic philosophy: "I am quite sure that around the corner is something good." Around Lana Turner's corner was something named Johnny Stompanato. Shortly after she separated from Lex Barker, in the spring of 1957, and before she began *Peyton Place*, Turner was approached by the young and aggressive operator of a gift shop in Hollywood. He had allegedly obtained her

telephone number from underworld figure Mickey Cohen. This young man, Johnny Stompanato, already had been married three times himself and, at age thirty-two, was a veteran hoodlum who knew his way around. Inexplicably, Lana Turner fell for him.

Everyone knows what happened. On the evening of Good Friday, April 4, 1958,[†] Lana Turner was threatened in her own home by an angry Stompanato. Her teenage daughter, fearing for her mother's life, drove a butcher knife deep into his abdomen, and he died before the authorities arrived. This was one of the most sensational scandals in Hollywood history. Combined with her shaky marital record, it made Turner appear to be one step out of the gutter, an image journalists did much to promote. Turner's pathetic breakdown in court, when she attempted to testify on her daughter's behalf, was treated in newspapers almost as a joke. At the very best, it was regarded as no more than another Lana Turner piece of casting. Her testimony was called "a dramatic personal triumph far beyond anything she has achieved as an actress." Her words were referred to as a "Hollywood scenario," her sobbing as a "performance." Newsreels of the trial were shown in every movie theatre across the country, and there was Lana, sobbing, "I didn't know what was happening!" *Time* magazine referred to her as a "wanton," describing her sex life as a men's room conversation "everywhere from Sunset Boulevard to Fleet Street." Her love letters to Stompanato (pitifully childish) were published in the papers, and large photos of Cheryl sitting alone at juvenile hall were spread across magazines. Every word of the testimony was printed. *Life* magazine ran pictures of Turner's trial scenes in films (*Postman*, *Cass Timberlane*, and her current release, *Peyton Place*).

It was a three-ring circus of yellow journalism. Except for a few articles by old-time hacks like Louella Parsons and Walter Winchell, there was very little sympathy for Lana Turner. There a great deal of sensational press coverage not only of the murder and of Cheryl's trial, but also of the tragic aftermath of misunderstanding and confusion both mother and daughter suffered in the following years.* After the Stompanato trial, not only was Lana Turner's

private life in a mess but her professional life was also up for grabs. Reportedly she suffered anxiety coupled with shame that immobilized her and left her fearful of the future. She had, after all, been the sole support of herself, her mother, and her daughter since she was little more than a girl. If she couldn't work, what would they do? More important, what would *she* do? With no real education, Turner only knew how to do one thing: be a glamorous movie star.

As she aged, the pain of these years was seldom mentioned by her, but near the end of her life, she commented, "Whoever started the idea that we [stars] are public property? We give the public performances, glamour, and a dream. But we are all human beings, and we should have moments that are our own. If I were just an ordinary working girl and someone asked me some of the questions I've been asked, I'd say, 'Get lost, Buster!' But I just take a deep breath and try to answer. I resent stupid questions, but I can't do anything about the Lana Turner image. I've lived with it too long."

During Cheryl Crane's trial, *Peyton Place* was in the theatres, drawing huge crowds. It had been made prior to the scandal but released almost simultaneously with the trial. Turner's big scene in *Peyton Place* occurs in a courtroom, where she breaks down on the witness stand. Ironically, about the time she was breaking down on movie screens all over America, she was breaking down in that same chair in real life. Fascinated movie audiences felt they were experiencing her private anguish, reenacted for their benefit. They saw her character only as "Lana Turner."

The film became a giant hit. Turner actually plays well in her role of Constance MacKenzie, an unwed mother whose lover is a married man. Wearing her hair in a tight French twist and pursing her lips, she represses her own native sensuality, creating the opposite of her usual film self. Lana Turner was nominated for a Best Actress award by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, her first and only such nomination. She lost to Joanne Woodward in *The Three Faces of Eve*, but for the first—and last—time, Hollywood had taken its goddess seriously in the acting department.



Lana Turner willingly accepted mother roles ... with Diane Varsi in
Peyton Place ...

The brouhaha surrounding Turner, combined with the success of *Peyton Place*, encouraged distributors to hurry the two pictures she had made after the Wald production into 1958 release: *The Lady Takes a Flyer*, made for Universal, and *Another Time, Another Place*, the film she had been working on in England during the last difficult days of her affair with Stompanato. In both, Turner looks almost frozen, unreal, as if she's been sprayed on the screen with a can of Day-Glo. Her makeup is perfect, but the glamour seems to be defining her where once she had defined the glamour. For the first time, her bubbling sense of fun (translate: her youth) seems to be gone, although that fact is nowhere visible on her face. All three films went into release during Lana Turner's most sensational publicity. After the trial, when Cheryl was placed in the custody of her grandmother, Turner faced her greatest uncertainty. For a year or more she hid from the press. Ironically, Lana Turner had ahead of her the best film she ever made in terms of financial success and cinematic excellence. This film, *Imitation of Life* (1959), ensured her

a solid income for life, as she owned a percentage of the profits. It also revitalized her career, though in a limited way.

Ross Hunter, a producer famous for furniture over form in film, signed her to play the lead in his remake of Claudette Colbert's 1930s success, *Imitation of Life*, based on Fannie Hurst's novel. The film was to be directed by Douglas Sirk, a man noted for turning sows' ears into silk purses. For those who see a trip to the movies as a good escapist browse through gorgeous goods, *Imitation of Life* is stuffed with clothes, furniture, jewelry, makeup, and hairdos, each one more eye-filling than the last. For the literary set, there is a strong story, and for theatrical types, there are excellent performances. For those who care about good filmmaking, here's a PhD thesis on how to do it.



Lana Turner in *Imitation of Life* with Sandra Dee ... and clutching her little son, who will never know she's really his mom, in *Madame X*.



Turner plays the leading role of Lora Meredith, a woman so caught up in her life as a successful stage star that she's blind to those around her who need and love her. Again, the movie was specifically designed to provide Turner fans with another uncanny real-life parallel, as Turner plays a mother who wants her daughter to have all the advantages she never had but forgets to give her what she needs most: love and attention. ("I haven't been a good mother," sobs Turner to her daughter, played by Sandra Dee. "You meant to be," replies Dee.) The public, having lived through the Turner trial with its sobbing mother and bewildered daughter, having witnessed the tragedy that a career-driven mother brings to the family table by ignoring the emotional needs of her daughter, was ready to gobble up Lana Turner as a career-driven show business mother. As a result, *Imitation of Life* was a huge success, so much so that the Turner films that followed it were more handsomely produced soap operas designed to imitate the imitation (of life) at the box office. Without Douglas Sirk, however, these films fell flat.

The first of these, *Portrait in Black* (1960), paired Turner with two-time Academy Award winner Anthony Quinn. The credits reflected a trend in Turner films—a listing for who did her jewelry as well as her gowns, furs, and hairstyles. In this phase of her

career, these credits were as important as anything else. Maybe even more important. Pinning a great white orchid on her black sequined gown, glittering with diamond earrings, bracelet, and matching pin, Turner flashes her famous dimples and proves to the audiences that she's the last working movie star who can generate the old-time glamour.

In 1961 and 1962, her career managed to keep going with one drama and two comedies: *By Love Possessed* (1961), based on one of the great literary successes of the '50s, earning its author, James Gould Cozzens, an inflated reputation late in his life; *Bachelor in Paradise* (1961), co-starring Bob Hope, in which she has one delicious moment sloshed on Polynesian drinks doing a slow, sexy hula; and *Who's Got the Action?* (1962), which teams her with Dean Martin.

After she completed *By Love Possessed*, Turner had wed Fred May, her fifth husband. He was a Los Angeles businessman who was said to worship her, but by the time she had completed *Who's Got the Action?*, it was apparent that this marriage, like all her others, was collapsing. In October 1962, she obtained a quickie divorce from May in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. In 1961, Turner was only forty-one years old. She had been a big-time movie star for more than twenty years, and she was still youthful and extraordinarily attractive. But the times were changing, the business was undergoing serious revisions, and Turner was, however slowly, aging. She did not make another movie until 1964, spending the intervening years reading the many scripts she was submitted (none of which she found appropriate) and filling her professional time with television, considering permanent retirement, and touring with Bob Hope on an 18,000-mile trek through the Far East with his show for military troops.

Finally, she was offered a film, *Love Has Many Faces*. Released in 1965, the movie put her back on familiar ground. Some might even say too familiar. Sunbaked and sleek, Turner plays a rich lady with a shady past. Married to a former beach bum (Cliff Robertson), she tries to keep their love from being destroyed by the bored life they lead in Acapulco. The character is another of those "I spoil

everything I touch” women. *Love Has Many Faces* is no worse than some other Turner films, but there’s a sadness to it, and to her being in it, that can’t go unnoticed. The character she plays openly panders to what was believed to be Turner’s real self—rich, bored, destructive, and preoccupied with sex. Hugh O’Brian (whose wardrobe is rivaled only by her own) is playing an obvious Johnny Stompanato type, a gigolo who blackmails the wealthy women who fall for him. (Turner and Stompanato were known to have vacationed in Acapulco together.) Scenes of Turner stretched out on a king-sized bed like a human sacrifice in the afternoon light have an eerie quality. The finale, in which she is gored in her abdomen by a bull, is too symbolic to even think about.

Once again, the credits list the men who did the jewels, clothes, and home furnishings. Once again, Turner is dressed to the teeth. Whether wearing a simple black bathing suit topped off with a vivid yellow turban or decked out in a glittery set of blue cocktail shorts with matching stole and jewelry, Turner looks sensational. Critics could say her films were awful—and they did—but they had to admit that Lana Turner still epitomized “movie star.”

All of her films during this period were panned by critics. However, they rose to new heights insulting the next one, a remake of the old turkey *Madame X* (1966). This film earned Turner one of the most famous put-downs any actress ever received when critic Pauline Kael wrote, “She’s not Madame X, she’s Brand X. She’s not an actress, she’s a commodity.” (Ironically, Turner plays with absolute conviction, giving a good performance.) In her big final scene, she—down-and-out and accused of murder—is defended by her grown son, who doesn’t know she’s his mother. Once again put on the witness stand and once again evoking her private life, Turner gives a touching performance that in earlier times could have earned her an Oscar.

Turner celebrated the film’s completion in what was becoming a tradition: She got married. This time it was another young man-about-town who neglected to mention a previous marriage (although at least, unlike Steve Crane, he *was* legally divorced): Robert Eaton, number six. Turner was then off the screen for three

years, coming back to make a disastrous film shot in Mexico and titled *The Big Cube* (1969). After thirty-two years in the business, Lana Turner for the first time looks less than gorgeous. Playing the role of a famous actress, she wears an expensive wardrobe but is undermined by a series of gorgonlike wigs, knee-high boots that belong on a teenager, and armloads of jewelry. She looks false and unreal, an imitation of Lana Turner. Or worse, an imitation of Mae West. Although *The Big Cube* would seem to be as bad as a film could be, Turner, as always, could surprise her audiences. *Persecution* (1974), also released as *Sheba* and *The Terror of Sheba*, was by her own admission even worse. (“A bomb,” she called it.)

The poor films weren’t all of it. Alas, Lana Turner’s penchant for unfortunate marriages continued. Her personal life could only be described, even by those who loved her, as a mess. It was a decade of confusion for her, particularly during Cheryl’s difficult years of adjustment. Turner wed and divorced both Fred May and Robert Eaton, but outdid herself with number seven, a nightclub hypnotist she had known only three weeks. He, too, forgot to mention a former marriage, as well as to give his right name (Ronald Peller).^{*} After Turner’s seventh husband attempted to kill a fellow hypnotist somewhere in Arizona, and after their marriage of six months—her shortest since Artie Shaw—Lana Turner separated from number seven.

With the hypnotist, Lana Turner had reached the bottom. In late 1969, she brought suit against him, accusing him of defrauding her of \$34,000. In addition she received the gloomy news that a television series she was appearing in, *The Survivors*, would not itself survive. This show, launched in September, had been one of her hopes for a new lease on her career. She didn’t need money—besides the income from her films, she owned land and several winning racehorses—but she did need something to do professionally. (“I need activity,” said Turner. “Oh God, how I need activity.”[†])

The last years of Turner’s stardom, from 1957 to 1976, illustrate what is left to a female movie queen who is aging and locked into

roles that reflect her own life after the system that built her, nourished her, supported her, and defined her throws her out—and then itself collapses and disappears. Turner makes thirteen movies in twenty years where she once made nineteen movies in ten years. Two of these movies are among her best ever—*Peyton Place*, her Oscar-nominated film, and *Imitation of Life*, the film that most people know her by today. Yet neither of these movies led to anything. She was too old (thirty-seven in *Peyton Place*) and too famous as “Lana Turner.” As she accepted assignments, producers and studios that hired her tried to use her own personal life as fodder or to imitate *Imitation of Life*. Her career as a movie star was one of the biggest and best known of her era, but it had ultimately come to being just that: the career of a movie star. Not an actress. Not even a personality. She was a star who played a star. And even if she played an airplane pilot, she was playing a star airplane pilot. In 1976, the story of Lana Turner could be summed up: By the end of 1937, Julia Jean Mildred Frances Turner had become Lana Turner. By the end of 1973, Lana Turner had become Lana Turner Shaw Crane Crane Topping Barker May Eaton Dante ... and the latter had consumed the former. Her glamour ate her up. Her offscreen life, or what people thought it was, became the only role she was allowed to play. She was indeed “bigger than life.” Although in the beginning, her career seemed as if it would be a model example of star machine success, her case was one of the machine going berserk when she was fed into it.

Lana Turner was not the first movie star to create romantic scandals. The difference for her was that she was never officially forgiven for her peccadilloes. She lived through them and finally lived long enough to live them down. Ingrid Bergman was ostracized—even denounced in Congress—when she bore Roberto Rossellini’s child, but she was publicly forgiven and welcomed home with open arms that held an Oscar in each fist. When her sins were revealed, Marilyn Monroe was said to be a product of her wretched past, more victim than victimizer. Ava Gardner, whose high living made international headlines, was called a modern playgirl and cited as a liberated woman who used men as men had once used

her. Elizabeth Taylor Hilton Wilding Todd Fisher Burton Burton Warner Fortensky was said to be too beautiful to be responsible for anything—and, besides, she was sickly. Lana Turner, however, suffered both scandal *and* humiliation. She was made to pay.

After her retirement, Turner lived a life of luxury, granting an occasional interview and sometimes telling listeners about one of her earliest childhood memories. Sometime in the '30s, she said, an old beat-up Star automobile (the only car on the market cheaper than a Model T) drifted down a California highway, headed toward San Francisco. In the backseat, sound asleep, was a dark-haired young woman. Up front at the wheel, but also sleeping, sat a handsome man. In his lap, steering for all she was worth was a little girl with a pink hair ribbon—Miss Judy Turner.

“I believe that such incidents in early childhood have a great bearing on what you are like and how you behave later in life. I was applauded for taking over in an emergency. I learned that was the thing to do.”

The question is: Did it ever really happen? It seems possible that the event might be a recurring nightmare of a little girl whose father was murdered and whose mother was forced to board her out with strangers. Or even of a teenage kid who had to support her family with her sex appeal and good looks. While she was still too young to be in charge, before anyone had taught her what she needed to know, Lana Turner found herself up front in the spotlight, driving the car as best she could: “Almost from that day my life has been a series of emergencies in which I have had to take the wheel without knowing where I was going or how to run the machine.”

At the end of her life, Lana Turner had figured out and accepted the realities of her goldfish bowl life: “When a small-town girl makes a mistake, her family covers up for her. But me, nobody covers up for me.” She realized that this was a price she had to pay for stardom: “We are unconscious of what Hollywood may do to us. At the same time, it is unfair to blame this on Hollywood ... I know, of course, that my love affair with Crane, my quick remarriage because of my child, and then a divorce—I know these matters must

have seemed hilariously funny, the irresponsible antics of Hollywood people of no character. I can blame no one.”

She was always known to be vulnerable: “Why do people want to hurt me? I can’t understand it.” She kept that softness because she was a kind person basically, but she finally worked out her own private rules to live by: “Never look back is my philosophy. What’s past is past, and I can’t let it destroy me ... I must continue working. The fact is that it’s the only thing I know.”

Lana Turner never *did* look back. She had always had youth on her side, as well as a basic resilience and a durable constitution. Although she may have led a disastrous private life, she had always kept going. Turner was always looking ahead, watching for that “something good just around the corner” that usually turned out to be a pie in the face or worse. She never whined to the press about how tough things were when she was young. She didn’t kill herself. She didn’t end up waiting tables in a small-town beanery. She wasn’t found down and out in Bellevue. Unlike the high priestess in *The Prodigal*, she refused to leap into the flames, and she ended up a wealthy legend.

Comparing Turner to other female movie legends—Elizabeth Taylor, for instance—it is clear that where Taylor was spoiled and dependent on men, Turner was spoiled and independent of them. She just happened to like them a lot. And she happened to make a lot of bad choices. For this—and for her liberated lifestyle, which did not recognize the double standard—Lana Turner was publicly denounced.

It was inevitable that a girl with Turner’s looks wasn’t going to stay poor and unknown. She had to end up jeweled and gowned. Lana might have become a little girl with no daddy but a sugar daddy; instead, she earned her own living. Early in life she became accustomed to being the boss at home—she was the person who paid the bills. She knew it was *her* looks and *her* talent that brought home the dollars. She began to take the role of aggressor in relationships, without feeling the slightest bit self-conscious. After all, she was Lana Turner. Why hang back and wait for the man to decide? She picked her own men, and she could have her pick.

Although totally feminine, Lana Turner was one of the first film stars to openly take the male prerogative for herself. She was less a slave to sex than she was its master.

Originally, Metro thought Turner might inherit Joan Crawford's roles. Like Crawford, Turner had behind her the escapist daydreaming of a lonely and poverty-stricken little girl. In the early stages of her career, they cast her as a commoner trying to make it across the tracks. But Turner, growing up in Hollywood, took too much of Tinseltown into her pores to be believable in the hash house. After a certain point, she looked too rich, too polished, too elegant, too much the girl from Orchid City to bring off a rags-to-riches role. Furthermore, whereas Crawford could suppress her glamour and reach into herself to find the memory of her humble origins, Turner appeared to cut loose her past and believe in her own glamour. For her audiences, she was truly a movie goddess, born and raised on film for their pleasure. She became a star, the thing most dreamed of, while she was still herself a dreamy girl. She survived by accepting the dream as her reality. The life she took up in Hollywood was a fantasy life, both on-screen and off. Instead of being a person who had to develop an image, Turner was an image who had to develop as a person, to grow up. For her this was a long, painful process that took place on the front page.

Lana Turner is both a typical product of the system and one that, against all odds, survived it and finally outlived it. Its machinery taught her how to be a star, and she believed everything it taught her. In her later years, she took real pride in having survived the star machine and lauded the process. "Nowadays, young actresses and actors make one picture and they are billed as stars. Why, when we were at MGM, we worked years before anybody called us stars. I don't consider those years as bondage. I'm very grateful for them. I like to think they gave me a basic foundation." In the end, Turner became something of a glamorous recluse, but she *was* glamorous. There's a real sense of justice in that. She was smarter than everyone thought she was. And her fans were more loyal. Without anyone realizing it, and with no official recognition of the fact, Lana Turner had taken the final step due her as a movie star of the golden

age of Hollywood. She had been elevated to legendary status. In April 1975, the Town Hall in New York invited her to appear on their stage in person to discuss her career in a series called “Legendary Ladies.” (Others had been Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Myrna Loy.) No one knew exactly what would happen on Turner’s night; nobody thought she was a Davis or Crawford. But the evening was a sellout, including standing room. A packed audience quivered in anticipation, and when she walked out onto the stage, dressed all in white, looking every inch the glamour girl, she received a prolonged standing ovation. She was introduced as “star of screen, radio, television, and stage” and she dimpled, charmed, sparkled. Lana Turner was still Lana Turner. Her career might have been over,* but she now had a new one: living legend.



Lana Turner in her later years, posing with her younger self with no fear of comparison.

Occasionally, Turner would appear onstage, in documentaries, interviews, and television biographies, but having become a legend, she more or less did what legends do, which is be legends. And just

to authenticate her absolutely “movie star” life story, she was allowed to go out on the very top, onstage, in full star regalia, and with the sound of applause roaring, as, once again, she walked forward for her admirers. Shortly before she died of throat cancer on June 29, 1995, she pulled herself together and, ill though she was, flew to Barcelona to accept a tribute from the Spanish Film Festival. She took the stage dressed to the teeth, small and thin but looking absolutely fantastic. It was her final walk before her public, and she gave it everything she had. She received a thunderous standing ovation.

Once asked what she would like to be remembered for, Turner said, “I just want to be remembered as a sensitive woman who tried to do her job, that’s all ... I would like to think that in some small way I have helped preserve the glamour and the beauty and the mystery of the movie industry.” Her final statement on the subject could have been written by a studio flack, and it reflects what MGM had taught her—do your job, be grateful for it, always look your best, and stay loyal to the machine. To her death, she was an A student, a PhD of the studio system’s rigorous schooling, and a survivor of its horrors.

ERROL FLYNN



Errol Flynn

Errol Flynn had everything it took for movie career longevity except one thing: stability. Flynn led a flamboyant private life that, despite the efforts of his home studio (Warner Bros.), could not be kept off the front pages. Maintaining a long career required discipline and self-denial, two things Flynn had no time for. Flynn played, and he played hard. Like Lana Turner, he slipped out of the control of the star machine in his offscreen life. He began to be defined by fistfights, drunkenness, love affairs, and excess that ended in a trial for statutory rape. It was all very glamorous in its way—at least it made him into a mythical Don Juan figure. Also like Turner, he ended up living an imaginary self linked to his movie self via his notoriety. Flynn seemed “gentlemanly,” but it was a quality he used when he wanted it and tossed over his shoulder when he didn’t. He gave his fans what they wanted, taking on an offscreen lighthearted spoof of “Errol Flynn,” claiming not to care but alleviating his pain through alcoholism and drug addiction. Underneath his devil-may-care surface was an embarrassment about being an actor that caused him to destroy first his reputation, then his career, and ultimately himself. For most male stars, performing in movies was their profession. They were actors and proud of it. Flynn was a movie star and ashamed of it.

When his private life first began to come under unsympathetic scrutiny, Flynn had a Scaramouche-like answer to his critics: “I allow myself to be understood abroad as a colorful fragment in a drab world.” It’s an elegant and bravura statement—and a pretty good definition of what a movie star is supposed to be—but Flynn also said such things as “I want to be taken seriously” too often for his life not to seem ultimately tragic. (His third wife, actress Patrice Wymore, said Flynn had a “divine discontent” within him.) He wasted too much. Yet he was so charming, so full of life, so genuinely dashing and just plain fun to watch, that Flynn never

needs to be pitied like a John Gilbert or even a John Barrymore. His star shone as brightly as any, but sadly he went down early and ugly, dying at the age of fifty, a bloated alcoholic.

Flynn always presented himself on-screen with dash and style, and he was that useful player who could move from genre to genre. In the year 1938 alone he appeared in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (an adventure film), *Four's a Crowd* (a screwball comedy), *The Sisters* (an out-and-out women's film), and *The Dawn Patrol* (a war combat movie). He could play comedy or drama, action or melodrama, and he could easily have had much greater longevity had he taken up a less destructive lifestyle. However, it's easy to shortchange the strength (and even the length) of Flynn's career. He made more than fifty movies in only twenty-five years. Flynn fulfilled the investment Warners made in him when they dumped him into their star machine. Despite his playboy life, Flynn was a pro, and he could be counted on to fit anywhere the studio put him.* The problem was the places he put himself in his offscreen life.

Errol Flynn's stardom is defined by four things: (1) his athleticism, which extended his range into action movies; (2) his lesser ability to support female stars—with some he was compatible (Olivia de Havilland and Ida Lupino) but with many he was not (Bette Davis); (3) his scandalous private life; and (4) the fact he was totally a product of the star machine.

When Flynn arrived in Hollywood in the 1930s, he was noticed immediately and swept up into the social scene. People who knew him then have said he was even more charming in person than on film. He was reputed to be witty, full of mischief, and a real athlete. He could swim, box, ride horses well, sail, fence, and dance with graceful ease. Unlike the majority of the male movie stars of his era, Flynn was actually a big man: six feet two inches tall, just under 200 pounds. Yet he was never awkward and seemed to be completely comfortable inside himself. The first thing one notices about him is his fabulous smile—one that both charms and cons. This duality connected him directly to his viewers. He flashes his charm inside the movie story, following the dictates of the plot, but flashes the con outward to the viewer, setting up a warm secondary level of

communication, creating intimacy between himself and his audience. It's impossible to believe anything he's saying in a movie because it's impossible to believe *he* believes it. Yet it's also impossible not to believe in him as Errol Flynn, a swell fella, letting us in on the secret universe he inhabits as star. Many of the leading men of Flynn's era had this quality: William Powell, Clark Gable, Jimmy Cagney, Cary Grant. It's a form of male apology for being actors, and it perhaps made them more comfortable with the roles they were playing and the money they were making. They all have a built-in quality of "don't believe this is the real me" to their playing that both denies stardom and locks it into place.

Flynn's stardom is grounded in the sense of naughtiness that hangs about him.* He's the bad boy in school who livened up the classroom for the rest of us cowards. (And that quality was not something invented for him, as the world later learned; he really *was* a naughty boy.) Such characters need a straitlaced society to play against. They are rule breakers, so they need rules. An Errol Flynn type of role is one that operates against the rules, but in a *safe* format, a reassuring one. Rather than being really dangerous or menacing—a Cagney or a Robinson or a Karloff—Flynn became the character who menaced stuffiness, a welcome breath of fresh air that blew across the dining table as well as across the forces of tyranny. He was a comfortable kind of rebel for audiences of the 1930s. He always acted his roles with simple dignity. He knew how to deliver a line, any kind of line—to toss it off if it was a clinker or to hammer it down if it mattered. (He possessed a lovely voice, something that's seldom remarked on.)

Flynn's mischief emerges in any kind of role, no matter how serious. (Perhaps the exception that proves the rule is his appearance as Soames Forsyte in *That Forsyte Woman*.) On-screen he seems willing to try anything. He's the epitome of "devil may care." This quality worked for him in comedies and, when added to his good looks, made him a perfect romantic leading man. Add in his adventurous, athletic self, and the sum of his stardom is defined: comedy plus romance plus danger. Few actors can give an audience all that in one package. In this regard, Flynn was the heir apparent

to Douglas Fairbanks Sr., one of America's most popular silent film stars. Audiences saw in Flynn the spirit of Fairbanks—he had the same humor, joie de vivre, and casually adventuresome dash. Before he became “Errol Flynn,” moviegoers welcomed him to the screen as a suitable replacement for their beloved Fairbanks.

Today, Flynn is mostly remembered as a ladies' man, a romantic figure in the movies. Sorting out his career, however, reveals that he's “romantic” more in the swashbuckling, adventurous meaning of the term than in the love-affair department. In retrospect, it's significant to note that romantic entanglements in a Flynn film are played down, or are peripheral, or just a soupçon in the greater stew of the action. For instance, in *Dive Bomber* (1941), the romantic leading lady, Alexis Smith, appears on-screen with Flynn for about two minutes near the beginning of the movie, and then disappears while he becomes a flight surgeon, leaving behind his career as a famous doctor to serve his country. She reappears for the first time about half an hour later. Lo and behold, she was married and divorced offscreen while we weren't looking! Obviously, nothing that happens to Alexis Smith in *Dive Bomber* matters a bit to Flynn's character, who has barely noticed her absence. Their relationship is given a few more minutes of screen time—and that's the big Errol Flynn romantic situation.* In fact, in all of Flynn's adventure movies, his romances are secondary. That's why Olivia de Havilland—his most frequent co-star—was so important to the development of his early career. In *Captain Blood*, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *Dodge City* (1939), *Santa Fe Trail* (1940), and *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941), de Havilland convincingly presents herself as a beautiful, memorable woman in Flynn's life, someone he is fighting for or motivated to protect.† Her looks and talent are so significant that she comes across as Flynn's equal—and suitable partner—even though she's given much less screen time. On-screen Flynn was always three parts adventurer to one part lover. (In some of his successful movies, such as *Dawn Patrol* [1938], *Kim* [1950], and *Objective, Burma!* [1945], women

play almost no role at all.) It was his offscreen life that invented the infamous phrase “in like Flynn.”

His reputation as a movie lover was undoubtedly enhanced by his romantic exploits offscreen. His private life and his on-screen type gradually blurred in the minds of his fans. This is no surprise, because the difference wasn't all that great. The movie Flynn sailed the seas, was an excellent sportsman, rebelled against repressive forces, tried his hand at many occupations, always welcomed a dare or an adventure, and wooed—really wooed—the ladies. The real-life Flynn? He sailed the seas, was an excellent sportsman, rebelled against repressive forces, et cetera, and *really* wooed the ladies. The association was logical.*



Flynn in his early days in Hollywood, the perfect definition of the term, “hunk of man.”

Flynn's life was the stuff that star machine publicity flacks could get into and embellish. He was born in Tasmania, to Australian parents. His father was a professor of oceanography, so Flynn was not a typical unwashed actor picked out of the bean patch. He had sophistication and background, so he knew that much of what Hollywood stood for was nonsense. When it came to academics, however, Flynn was not a chip off the old block. He left school at an early age and worked passage on ships. He was a competent sailor who loved being on the ocean. In his autobiography, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*—published to great success in 1959—Flynn described all his colorful adventures as a young sailor in Shanghai, Hong Kong, and New Guinea, where he was accused of murder. With a jaunty air, he writes that he “sent for all the law books I could get my hands on” in order to prepare to defend himself against the charges. (Since he won his case, we have to assume that in his youth, Flynn mastered the mysteries of the Anglo-Australian jurisprudence system!)

Most people believe that Flynn broke into the movies at the star level, an overnight sensation in the title role in the hit movie *Captain Blood*, in 1935. However, Flynn had actually made his first movie in 1933, at the age of twenty-four, playing Fletcher Christian in an Australian version of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, called *In the Wake of the Bounty*. This experience motivated him to go to England to work as an actor; he had the looks, and he had the nerve. He worked in small rep companies, and within a year landed a role in a Warner Bros. London studio production, *Murder at Monte Carlo* (1935).

The London branch of Warner Bros. saw Flynn's potential, so in 1935 he was sent to the main office in Hollywood to be developed. The system initially followed its usual pattern. He was cast in two “tryout” movies: *The Case of the Curious Bride* and *Don't Bet on Blondes*. Does he stand out? Well, in *Bride*, a Perry Mason “case” starring Warren William, Flynn played a dead body. Not much opportunity to shine. But in *Blondes*, also starring William, he had just enough footage to make his mark, and all the assets that would define his screen stardom are visible. He has only two scenes. In the

first, he's walking toward the camera on a golf course, with the pretty Claire Dodd on his arm. He's easy and comfortable, focused entirely on her. He's dressed in Hollywood's idea of golf course high style: a bandanna around his neck, a handkerchief in his pocket, a casual sports coat and slacks, an open-neck shirt with a sweater vest. While he talks confidently about himself to Dodd, he strolls along, hands in pockets, and suavely pulls out a silver cigarette case. All his movements are natural. It's clear Errol Flynn is utterly at home inside the movie frame. Staring at him lovingly, Dodd says, "You're all the delicious things I like." (Amen, the women in the audience must have been thinking.) In his second scene, he's in a nightclub, wearing a tuxedo. In a pure comedy sequence in which William and his cohorts set him up to look as if he's nothing but a cheap gangster, he displays a light touch, a distinct and confident manner. He's too beautiful to look unattractive and too keen-eyed to look stupid, so he wisely does the damage to himself, acting totally bewildered but covering his confusion with great manners. It's a perfect little screen moment. The on-screen grace, ease, and humor were clearly part of Flynn himself.

In the meantime, Flynn was cutting a swath around town with the ladies, most notably Lili Damita, a fiery Latin movie star who would become his first wife. He had the manners and wardrobe to fit in at the highest echelons of Hollywood parties, and he attracted attention everywhere he went. However, so did other good-looking young men, and he wasn't the first to date a prominent actress. What happened to Flynn is one of those lucky career accidents that the star machine was always ready to capitalize on. Warner Bros. was ready to shoot a lavish production of *Captain Blood*, based on the Sabatini best seller. The star was to be Robert Donat, a popular British actor who had already found success in such movies as *The Count of Monte Cristo*, in 1934. Donat was a distinguished actor who didn't want to play in more costume dramas and who was particularly worried about *Captain Blood's* dueling scenes. He suffered from asthma, and the physical exertion required couldn't be faked by doubles. Donat refused the role, leaving Warner Bros. suddenly in need of a handsome young star who could duel *and* who

was ready to go to work immediately. And there was the young, handsome, athletic Errol Flynn. They already had him under contract* and in their star machine; he was proving himself to be a glamour boy. Warner Bros. took a chance.

It's important to note that seldom did a big studio let a newcomer like Flynn carry such a big-budget picture. It *could* happen but rarely did. The decision turned out to be brilliant—for the studio, for the audience, and for Errol Flynn, who was born to play Captain Peter Blood. But it might have turned out differently. When Flynn was asked to step up, he was being put to the test even more rapidly than Tyrone Power, who, after all, had been born into an acting family and whose *Lloyd's of London* cost less to make. The burden was all on Flynn, the knockabout kid from Down Under with only four minor movies under his belt. Could he carry the picture and become a star?

Errol Flynn enters the screen in *Captain Blood* from frame right, carrying a lighted candle and dressed in a brocaded dressing gown. He's given an immediate medium close-up and a line of dialogue: "That we'll know better after you've opened the door," a response to his housekeeper's query as to who is knocking so late at night. Flynn's hair is somewhat blondish, rather long. He moves with ease to the door and confidently agrees to ride out into the night to help someone in need. (He is *Dr. Peter Blood*.) Warners, not being stupid about audience desires, then immediately lets the audience watch the young Flynn get dressed to go on his mission—screen time well spent. He tells his housekeeper, with a jaunty air, to take care of his geraniums while he's away. He addresses her affectionately as "my vinegary virgin." She clucks and tells him to forget the geraniums, adding, "Won't you ever grow up?" So right at the start is seen what everyone will later come to recognize as the character "Errol Flynn." He's comfortable in the richest of costumes, photographs well, tosses off zingers with ease, looks sexy, handles women, and establishes his priorities: geraniums over danger.

In some scenes, Flynn seems unpolished in his line delivery. From time to time, he grimaces, as in his big final fight scene, something that all Hollywood actors were taught not to do. ("Hold

your smile ... keep your face muscles from distorting ... never make faces” was a basic rule of movie star acting classes.) But when he woos Olivia de Havilland and fights his way to freedom, he carries the picture. With de Havilland he is flirty, lusty, and devilish. He kisses her without invitation and happily accepts the slap he receives for his effort. When he takes command of his fellow prisoners, urging them to rebellion, he is passionate, believable, even masterful. He looks as if he’s having a very good time doing it all. *Captain Blood* was a first-rate property given first-rate production values, and in it, Errol Flynn emerged as a first-rate personality with a first-rate future. He inhabited his role easily and, in 1935, became a “star overnight.” From *Captain Blood* onward Errol Flynn was always a star.



Flynn, in his first big Hollywood success, as *Captain Blood*, standing on deck ready for anything, including fame.

Excited by Flynn's success, Warners rushed him into a second film directed by Michael Curtiz, who had done *Blood*. *The Charge of the Light Brigade* was released in 1936 to equal success. This time, however, Warners had time to plan what to do with Flynn, and taking no chances, they surrounded him with a roster of tried-and-true actors (Henry Stephenson, Nigel Bruce, Donald Crisp, J. Carroll Naish, Spring Byington) as well as the young and hopeful (Patric Knowles and David Niven) and kept his *Blood* leading lady (de Havilland). Max Steiner was hired to create his very first movie musical score for Warners, and the production values were outstanding. In *Charge*, Flynn validated his earlier success.

Despite his sudden popularity, however, Flynn was subjected to the routine of the star machine. Warners, a notoriously cheap studio where actors were concerned, immediately started wondering if they were always going to have to spend a fortune on lavish costume films for Flynn. Such films were expensive to make, and Flynn would have to turn out more than one movie a year to be worth his money. They decided to test him in films that were modern and cheap to make. Even though he essentially began his career as a star in *Captain Blood*, the public accepted him with great joy, and his success was immediately confirmed by *Charge*, no one after the silent era was ever going to have a career playing nothing *but* swashbuckling roles. So Warners made him do what all beginners had to do: Play in a series of minor movies to prove he could carry them. "Others would have liked to make even these ... quickies," he said. "Why complain? I couldn't have it better."

After the success of *Charge*, Flynn made four movies in 1937: *Green Light*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Another Dawn*, and *The Perfect Specimen*. None is a major film, although *Green Light* is well directed by Frank Borzage. Three of these films were in modern dress, with only *The Prince and the Pauper*, based on the Mark Twain story, being a costume film. Although given top billing, Flynn doesn't appear until the second half of the movie. (He was already being used to carry a movie that starred two relatively unknown players, the Mauch Twins, Billy and Bobby.) His other films were tests of both his strength at the box office and his ability to support leading

ladies. *Another Dawn* is purely a woman's film, starring Warners' resident female box office draw, Kay Francis. *She* is the star. Flynn is her support. He plays an army officer at an African British outpost, and Francis is torn between her love for him and her love for her husband, played by Ian Hunter. (Some choice!) Flynn looks fantastic in uniform, and Francis is stunning in white flannel coats and long slinky gowns. (They embrace while the sands blow, the natives rise up, and everything turns out okay.) The movie is a reasonably intelligent presentation of a love affair that has nowhere to go, and Flynn was anyone's idea of a desirable lover, looking tanned and trim and super elegant. *Green Light*, based on a Lloyd C. Douglas novel, presented Flynn as an idealistic doctor trying to understand the meaning of life, and *Perfect Specimen* was a crazy comedy with Joan Blondell. In it, Flynn is slyly presented as a very rich young man who has been overly sheltered by his family, and thus knows nothing about life and women. Already he had enough of an established reputation as a lover to be able to make a movie joke about his sexual prowess.



Flynn took on the famous role defined in silent film by Douglas Fairbanks Sr. and matched the master's success in the gloriously produced *The Adventures of Robin Hood*.

At the end of 1937, Flynn had proved he was a workable star worth Warners' long-term investment, having successfully done costume, romance, melodrama, and crazy comedy. His career was rolling, and he had united his different roles with his own chipper manner, pushy self-confidence, and insistence on getting all the fun out of life he possibly could. Warners now knew it wanted to go all the way with Errol Flynn. His next movie was not only the one most people think was his greatest, but is inarguably one of the very best examples of a classic studio system movie. It still stands today as the best of what Hollywood could do—provide exciting family entertainment with depth of character, plus astonishing dueling scenes.

The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938) is a beloved film, revived often and to great success. It has a timeless quality, and the beauty of its co-stars (Flynn and de Havilland, paired again) is undiminished. They don't look dated or silly—even though Flynn has to dash around in green tights and leap onto tables and tree branches. The production values are frequently cited as among the very best in Hollywood's history: direction by Michael Curtiz and William Keighley, with location shooting for forest scenes; superb art direction and editing, both of which won Oscars; a brilliant and memorable score by the great Erich Wolfgang Korngold, who also won the Oscar for it; an excellent, well-paced script by Norman Reilly Raine and Seton I. Miller that manages to avoid the pitfalls of both literary adaptation and costume drama dialogue; superb Technicolor photography; and, finally, a supporting cast to die for. The list of superb character actors is amazing: Claude Rains as the evil Prince John, Basil Rathbone as Sir Guy of Gisbourne, Melville Cooper as the Sheriff of Nottingham, Eugene Pallette as Friar Tuck, Alan Hale as Little John, Patric Knowles as Will Scarlett, with Una O'Connor, Montagu Love, Herbert Mundin, and Ian Hunter thrown in for good measure.

Warner Bros. took one risk with *Robin Hood*—Flynn was being asked to re-create a role that had been owned by Douglas Fairbanks Sr. in the silent era. It was the ultimate test of the truth of Flynn's stardom. But Flynn, like Fairbanks, had the zing to give the role a joyous kind of life—and the addition of color, sound, and music put this *Robin Hood* into the front ranks of entertainment. As a movie star, Errol Flynn was home free.

This didn't mean he was off the hook on studio assignments, of course. Consider the very dumb role he has to play in *Footsteps in the Dark* (1941). This is light comedy coupled with a romance coupled with a murder mystery—generic insurance. Flynn plays a super-wealthy young man who, bored by investment banking, is secretly the writer of lurid mysteries. The role is wafer thin, the script shaky, and the directing routine. Luckily, Flynn is surrounded by a strong cast: Brenda Marshall as his wife, Lucile Watson as his mother-in-law, Ralph Bellamy as the main villain, Allen Jenkins as his loyal

sidekick and partner in pseudonymous writing. And as if they weren't enough, there's Alan Hale as the head policeman, Lee Patrick as a striptease artist, Turhan Bey as a mysterious servant, with Jack La Rue, William Frawley, Grant Mitchell, and Roscoe Karns—an amazing list of big-name character people.

Flynn can make the nonsense work. He cuts a suave figure, with not one sign of the dissipated bloat he would soon enough be picking up. There's not even a hint of a bag under an eye. His little pencil-thin mustache sits jauntily over his crooked smile, and he knows just how to move and position himself. He's slender, handsome, and impeccably dressed in beautifully cut and tailored handmade suits. When he enters the apartment of a potential suspect, the turbaned manservant (Bey) looks him over, taking in his jaunty bow tie, his crisp handkerchief correctly placed in his pocket, his careful haircut, his manicured nails, and his perfect profile, and says, "With a gentleman I'm happy to discuss anything."

In *Footsteps*, Flynn has three aspects to his character: the loving, romantic husband of Brenda Marshall; the second persona of the mystery writer who hangs out with the police and is often in physical danger; and a pseudonymous disguise he undertakes, Lucky Tex Gilbert, an oilman with a southern accent who sets out to woo the stripper, Blondie White, played, with her usual skill at capturing the truly low-down dame, by Lee Patrick. The film thus becomes a menu of Flynn's abilities. But what does the audience choose most often? Soon enough the studio learned that the audience didn't want Flynn doing the schnook role, and his impersonations of pseudo characters like Tex would disappear. Tongue-in-cheek for Flynn as an adventurer was okay with fans. Self-ridicule was not. At least, not yet.

Starting with *Four's a Crowd* in 1938 and leading up through *Dive Bomber* in 1941, Flynn made ten movies in three years. (Only three were in modern dress.*) Flynn's career in these years follows a typical star machine progression. Because he was a studio contract player, he was expected to carry the can in women's movies and comedies. He was never bad in anything; his touch was too light. But he was clearly uncomfortable in women's films and seldom

found a really good straight comedy role. (He did best with comedy that was tongue-in-cheek subtext, as in *Robin Hood*, which modernized the old story by infusing it with humor.) As handsome as he was, however, Flynn was just plain wrong for women's pictures. He didn't work well as a foil for a big female star. Forced to anchor *Cry Wolf*, Flynn seems grim, cheerless. He plays a no-fun-at-all older brother of a dead man Stanwyck claims to have married. A viewer can only wish for Preston Sturges to set the plot on its ear, revive the dead brother, and let Flynn play both roles in a riotous romp that spoofs greedy relatives murdering each other. Flynn could have been great in a movie like that, but he didn't look happy in *Cry Wolf*. Warner Bros. had learned this lesson earlier than 1947. It was inevitable that the studio would eventually want to pair its top box office draws, Flynn and Bette Davis. They made two movies together, *The Sisters* in 1938 and *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* in 1939. In both, Flynn has very little to do, and all reports indicate that the pairing was as unsuccessful offscreen as on.

The Sisters is a standard women's film about three girls who grow up and marry, with differing problems that are all conveniently solved. One wants money and glamour (Anita Louise), one wants comfort, family, and security (Jane Bryan), and one wants that little something extra out of life (Bette Davis, of course). When Davis locks eyes with Errol Flynn at an election eve dance in Silver Bow, Montana, in 1904, that's a lot of "something extra" as far as she's concerned. Naturally, it takes an Errol Flynn to make this believable, because Davis's character is also presented as intelligent, reliable, hardworking, and capable. Flynn is gorgeous but makes a bad husband ("I'm the kind of husband that makes the world feel sorry for his wife"). His persona makes the character work and the entire story credible, because he's willing to let audiences believe there is a rotten side to his charm.

The mix of Davis and Flynn, however, does *not* work. Davis was driven and über-professional. Flynn was larky and full of fun. She seems as if she doesn't really approve of him even in the scenes in which she's supposed to be blindly loving him. Flynn isn't diminished by his pairing with Davis—he's too good-looking and

easy in his role—but he doesn’t shine either. Davis wants a co-star who’s less a star than she is—a Glenn Ford, a Paul Henreid, a George Brent. She wants and needs the movie to be hers. Bette Davis was never once part of a power duo of dynamic star casting. She couldn’t accept an equal. Only Joan Crawford was up to the job.

There is always a tendency to underestimate Flynn, probably because of his messy offscreen life. In particular, when the names of great stars of westerns are listed, his is seldom among them. But Flynn was a successful star of westerns, as odd as that may now seem. After all, he has a British accent, slight though it is. And he’s elegant, graceful, and not an authentically American face like a John Wayne or a Randolph Scott. It makes sense to put him on the sea, yes, into combat, yes, and in tights in Sherwood Forest, yes. And in a lady’s boudoir, definitely yes. But in the West? Theoretically, it seems an odd choice, but it worked just fine. It’s a credit to Flynn’s strong screen personality that he could appear in American westerns and seem right at home on the range. In 1939, he was cast in *Dodge City*, followed by *Virginia City* in 1940, *Santa Fe Trail* (1940), *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941), *San Antonio* (1945), *Silver River* (1948), *Montana* (1950), and *Rocky Mountain* (1950). At first, some explanation was offered for his accent. Alan Hale does a long humorous riff on the subject in *Dodge City*, and in *Virginia City*, Randolph Scott inquires as to where he learned the skill of shooting at a moving target. Flynn answers: “In Afghanistan, the Kurds do it.” (Obviously he learned it in another Flynn movie, with a more appropriate setting!) Soon enough, fans just accepted his dapper presence in westerns, and no explanations were created.



... in *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, glamorous in his uniform



... proving he could do more than adventure films in comedies like *Four's a Crowd*, with Patric Knowles and Olivia DeHavilland



... bravely going up in the flimsy crates of World War I, with Basil Rathbone, in the 1938 version of *The Dawn Patrol*



... bravely facing one of his biggest challenges: co-starring with Bette Davis in *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*



... proving he could be as American as anybody, in Westerns such as
Dodge City



... portraying a pensive George Custer in *They Died with Their Boots On*

Both Flynn and his co-star, Miriam Hopkins, are billed over the title in *Virginia City*, followed by “with Randolph Scott, Humphrey Bogart.” (Still searching for his star identity, Bogart was a victim of the star machine, appearing as a Mexican bandit with a dubious accent and a laughable pencil-thin mustache. As one watches him in this small role of a villain, it is impossible to picture him becoming the darling of the Harvard Square Theatre in the 1960s.) The casting of *Virginia* seems crazy in other ways, too. Not only is Flynn inexplicably a Union soldier in *Virginia City* (making him a Southern rebel would have been more credible), but Miriam Hopkins is a western saloon singer who is actually a Southern spy and patriot. The role requires her, without a shred of musical talent, to “entertain” at the Virginia City nightspot. There she is, can-canning around the stage and dancing among the men in the audience, all of whom look vaguely frightened.

Well aware of the potential problems they might have with the high-living Flynn, the Warners publicity department shaped his roles and his fan magazine articles carefully. As early as *Footsteps in the Dark*, the movie had dialogue about Flynn’s character that was also designed to be about himself. “Oh, that fatal charm of his,” says Lucile Watson, playing his mother-in-law, and “Of course, it affects women like catnip to cats,” replies Brenda Marshall, playing his wife. This is dialogue as sales pitch and as reinforcement of what the women in the audience were already thinking. The machine had a colorful offscreen personality in Flynn, so they shaped dialogue in his movies to tell audiences how to see him, and fan magazines followed suit. The July 1942 issue of *Modern Screen* carried an article that tells readers “Flynn is not to be confused with the genus playboy who lives for the moment, doesn’t know what time it is, and has nothing to show for his pains but the circles under his eyes and a basketful of unsavory press clippings. The Flynn pursuit of pleasure is down-to-earth, harmless, and adult. Above all, it

observes a healthy respect for the law of cause and effect—a respect, nevertheless, which has not prevented him from going a cropper on occasions.” Although Warners was adept at this type of chicanery, behind the scenes they were far more hardheaded.

Like all studios, Warners was ever alert to disasters that could threaten their coffers and had already done what studios always did when a big-time star was known to act up around town. (Among other didoes, Flynn was said to have kicked Hedda Hopper in her rear end at Mocambo’s.) They found an Errol Flynn look-alike replacement and put him under contract, “just in case.” His name was Patric Knowles. It has often been pointed out by critics, among them the knowledgeable Robert Osborne of Turner Classic Movies, that Knowles and Flynn are look-alikes. Knowles had appeared *with* Flynn in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, playing Will Scarlett, and as his romantic rival in *Four’s a Crowd*. Because of the resemblance, Knowles’s dark hair had been dyed blond for *Robin Hood*, and true to his character, he was always decked out in scarlet. Side by side in still photographs, Knowles and Flynn could be taken for brothers and, if Knowles had Flynn’s mustache, perhaps even twins. In fact, it’s the mustache that separates them in *Four’s a Crowd*: One has it (Flynn) and the other doesn’t (Knowles). Yet only keen-eyed moviegoers ever really notice their remarkable similarity, because the star presence of Flynn totally eclipses that of Knowles. Knowles is handsome and can act, but he’s no Errol Flynn. In *Four’s a Crowd*, Flynn flamboyantly displays his character. Knowles is attractive and pleasant but plays his role as written. Flynn adds a bold conceit. “I’m incredible,” he tells co-star Rosalind Russell, but he laughs about it, managing to defang any male jealousy in the audience while endearing himself to the female viewers. Flynn could always joke about his sex appeal, and by doing it himself before anyone else could, he left Knowles no place to go. Knowles has to become the lesser Errol Flynn, the one forced to push hard to make his character work. He seems dated. Flynn is able to lie back, all cool and modern and mocking, even though he’s forced to bite a dog’s tail to get a laugh!

In the early years, despite their precautions, Warners wasn't too worried about Flynn. His bad-boy behavior seemed charming and effervescent and didn't appear to be an insurmountable problem. Besides, it fit the image they were selling. (Studios always knew how to put a spin on anything.) However, unlike the very professional Lana Turner, Flynn could be a problem on the set. Warners was careful to cast him mostly in movies directed by men who could handle him. Fifteen of Flynn's most successful movies were either directed by the dictatorial monster Michael Curtiz, or Raoul Walsh, himself a devil-may-care guy with an adventurous spirit. Walsh was perhaps Flynn's most kindred spirit and one of his closest offscreen pals. He directed *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941); *Desperate Journey* (1942); *Northern Pursuit* (1943); *Uncertain Glory* (1944); *Objective, Burma!* (1945); *San Antonio* (1945); *Silver River, Montana* (1950) and what many people feel is one of Flynn's most delightful films, *Gentleman Jim* (1942).

Walsh often spoke of Flynn with affection, telling me that on the one hand, what a charmer the actor was, and on the other, what a bad, bad boy! He seemed to understand Flynn thoroughly, and Flynn seems most comfortable, most himself, in movies directed by Walsh.* *Gentleman Jim* is a comedy, a biography, a costume picture, a romance, a family drama, and it has elements of the West, of an adventure movie, and even, with its fight scene, of combat. It's everything Errol Flynn could give an audience neatly wrapped up in one package, directed with a breakneck pace. Flynn is young, still looking beautiful, and his performance is both broad and subtle. Above all, he brings his character directly to the audience, illustrating perfectly why fans loved his cheeky manner and his handsome sex appeal. It was only 1942, but nothing better than *Gentleman Jim* lay ahead of Errol Flynn. Good films were yet to come—but nothing really any better. The best was behind him less than eight years after he started.

Things began to turn sour for Flynn during the early 1940s. Perhaps he might have curbed his drinking, grown out of his embarrassment about his "movie star" fame, or even got tired of beautiful women. But two things happened to change his life and his

image forever. One was of his own making, and the other was out of his control.

First, Errol Flynn did what he often did. On September 27, 1942, he went to a party, met a young girl named Betty Hansen, took her upstairs, and allegedly had sex with her. The next day, she claimed she had been seduced and was taken to protective custody in juvenile hall. She was seventeen years old. Officials realized that fourteen months earlier, another young girl had filed a similar complaint, claiming that Flynn had seduced her on his yacht, the *Sirocco*. Her name was Peggy Satterlee, and the charges she made had been dropped. The two accusations were now put together, and on October 11, Flynn was arrested and charged with having sex with a minor. It was a movie star's worst nightmare.

Flynn was fortunate in being able to retain Jerry Geisler, a famously ruthless trial lawyer who had a unique talent for exposing shaky witnesses. He also was known to have an army of "researchers" who could dig up dirt on anyone for any purpose. At the grand jury hearing, the two young girls gave confused accounts of what had happened, and the grand jury wasn't impressed. But the judge, believing the jury had been influenced by the good looks and stardom of Errol Flynn, overruled them. On October 17, 1942, while he was in the middle of shooting *Edge of Darkness*, Flynn was told that in six days he would be arraigned on two counts of raping Peggy Satterlee on the nights of August 2 and 3, 1941.

The resulting trial was not just a three-ring circus—it was a ten-ring circus. A top-level A-list movie star on trial for rape? And one who looked and acted like a bad boy? Despite the seriousness of the subject, the courtroom often erupted in laughter. (When asked what happened after the event under discussion, Satterlee said Flynn "brought me a glass of milk.") The studio wasn't happy, but what could it do? If Flynn lost, his career—and their investment—would be ruined. There was a lot at stake: for Flynn, for Warner Bros., and for Hollywood.

Geisler dug in. Betty Hansen turned out not to be very innocent, already under investigation for having sex with others. Satterlee turned out to be living with an actor, and Geisler also proved she'd

had an abortion (illegal in those days). He was able to discredit her testimony by proving that her memory of the bunk she claimed to have been raped on was incorrect. Finally, he proved she had lied about her age. Every ugly detail was pulled out and printed in the papers. The Brothers Warner discreetly kept away from the trial, in case of disaster, but some of Flynn's friends, notably Raoul Walsh, stood by. Flynn also had the sympathy of his fans and most of the press, a group he had always been easy and friendly with. Even Hedda and Louella closed ranks and protected him; he had long since charmed them both. After three months of hell and headlines, Flynn received his verdict: "not guilty." Flynn shook hands with the jurors, each one, very carefully, and delivered a perfectly gentlemanly speech: "My confidence in American justice is completely justified. I am happy, and I am sincerely grateful to all those whose confidence in me encouraged me to go through this ordeal."

It was a grim experience, and it had revealed Flynn's life to be fairly sordid. Now he was a bit of a bad joke. His life, his career, and his reputation would never be the same. In his autobiography, Flynn wrote of his shock not only at being arrested, but also at the public's reaction. "While I believed I would be an object of scorn and derision, it didn't turn out to be that way at all. On the contrary, the whole country seemed to get amusement out of it ... My box office appeal went up ... but now it had a rampant character ... I felt used. Used by the studio. Used to make money. Used by the press for fun. Used by society as a piece of chalk to provide the world with a dab of color." Everyone else moved on, but for Errol Flynn it was a downward turning point. And there would be another one.

Added to the trial horror was a factor over which Flynn had no control: World War II. Flynn was not an American, but he had applied for citizenship eight months after Pearl Harbor. He felt grateful to the country that had given him fame and wealth, and at the age of thirty-three, on August 15, 1942, had become eligible for the draft when he signed his citizenship papers. But there was a problem. The tall, beautiful hunk of man known to fans as Errol Flynn had recurrent malaria, a heart murmur, various venereal

diseases, and—as his examining doctor wrote in his draft file—“a tuberculosis, pulmonary, chronic reinfection (adult) type in the right apex.” Shockingly, the star promoted for his physical beauty and athleticism was disqualified for service because of bad health. The studio clamped down at once, fearing that this news, coupled with his hideous rape trial, would ruin his career just when they needed him most. Because the studio refused to let the truth be publicized about why Flynn wasn’t in the war, he became a favorite target of journalists who accused him of draft dodging.

This situation was exacerbated by the roles he played during the war. For the studio, the main thing was the bottom line: Flynn was a perfect choice to play the hero in war movies, and he was going to be available for the duration. Thus, Errol Flynn entered World War II through the movie camera, but *only* through the movie camera. His first World War II–related film was *Dive Bomber* in 1941, actually made before America was participating. It’s not really combat, but it put Flynn in uniform. After Pearl Harbor, Flynn was rushed into *Desperate Journey*, *Northern Pursuit*, *Uncertain Glory*, and *Objective, Burma!*



Objective, Burma!, Flynn’s famous World War II combat film, became a source of personal criticism for him.

The first, *Desperate Journey*,* presented Flynn and his fellow RAF pilots (among them Ronald Reagan) as a merry band of marauders who just happen to be shot down over Germany but who, with a tra la la, make their way back to England. (The movie ends with Flynn cheerfully piloting an enemy plane over the white cliffs of Dover and saying, “Now for Asia, and a crack at those Japs!”)

He might have gotten away with this kind of movie nonsense, since his next two war films didn’t actually cast him as a heroic soldier. In *Northern Pursuit* he’s a Mountie chasing a Nazi spy, and in *Uncertain Glory*, a criminal who’s accidentally set free when the Nazis bomb the train he’s being transported on. But then came *Objective, Burma!* in 1945: a beautiful war film, well directed by Raoul Walsh, and a grim presentation of actual combat. Flynn became a victim of backlash from those, especially in England, who resented him portraying a war hero when he was, in their eyes, a Hollywood goldbricker. *Objective, Burma!* was not well received in England, where they felt the role Great Britain had played was not given sufficient credit. (One famous headline sneered, “Errol Flynn Wins War in Burma.”) Articles about Flynn not being in service appeared in print, and critics mocked him. Letters to newspapers in America came from England and Australia, bitterly resenting him. This attitude was probably partly fueled by the scandals Flynn was kicking up offscreen, and by the sense that he was a no-good womanizer. (He was a womanizer, but no one ever suggested he wasn’t good at it.) Flynn’s offscreen “I don’t care” performance began to falter during these years, despite a reasonably stable marriage to the beautiful Nora Eddington (whom he met during his trial for rape). He was hurt and embarrassed by all this, but there wasn’t much he could do about it. Publicly, he decided to go along with the joke. “I yielded with a smile to the now-complete legend of myself as a modern Don Juan ... The public has always expected me to be a playboy, and a decent chap never lets the public down.”

In December 1942, he showed his guts when he performed a specialty song-and-dance number in *Thank Your Lucky Stars* (a Warners all-star war effort release of 1943). In an attempt to make fun of himself and disarm others, he sang the lyrics of a specially

written song, "That's What You Jolly Well Get." The number was set in a London pub, and Flynn was a Cockney who was singing exaggerated claims about his heroism in the war. His buddies in the pub ironically sing, "Urrah! 'E won the war!" Flynn is charming, singing and dancing with great energy and looking jaunty and happy. The number didn't do much to help his cause, however. He began to drink even more heavily and later wrote in his autobiography of his experiments with drugs and his generally dissolute life. Although Flynn remained a star until his death, the postwar period marked the beginning of the end of his popularity. The combination of his trial and his war roles caused him to lose favor, not only with the public but in his own eyes. He said, "In the back of all this there was a fellow inside myself who would say to me, 'You are an impostor, Flynn. In real life you don't do any of the things you do on the screen. You are no more capable of that kind of action in real life than a choirboy.' Maybe that is why, in my private life, I went ahead consciously or unconsciously, to live such a life of reality, rather than just portraying it all the time."

Warners decided that it was imperative to salvage Flynn's box office clout by immediately giving him a change of pace. As if to erase the wartime gripes about Flynn's sit-at-home status, Warners reintroduced the romantic comedy version of Flynn right away in 1946. The studio's hope was that everyone was sick of the war and would happily welcome back the Flynn they had loved in the 1930s. Always cautious with money, however, Warners didn't turn to a big-budget costume action film, but to a small black-and-white comedy. The film that was designed—and it *was* designed—for Flynn was *Never Say Goodbye*, a feeble-minded attempt to make a 1930s screwball comedy. Flynn's co-star was to be the remarkably beautiful Eleanor Parker, a newcomer on her way up, who in the old tradition could be supported by the big-name male star. It was the last gasp of the star machine for Errol Flynn.

Flynn always could play comedy well; his skill in that area had been an important part of his swashbuckling success. Comedy was always just beneath the surface of almost every role he played. But there's more than just comedy for Flynn in *Never Say Goodbye*.

There's comedy *about* Flynn. He's turned into a joke—a charming enough joke, but still a joke. It was a bad omen that Warners felt comfortable playing for laughs about Flynn's negative publicity and well-established offscreen sexual exploits. His character is a womanizing artist who draws “the Gaylie Girl” (a reference to the Vargas or Petty Girl calendar drawings of big-bosomed, long-legged fantasy women). Flynn drinks. He flirts. He cons. He sweeps women of all ages right off their feet. He's naughty (although nice). When he sends his little daughter a gift, she breathlessly says, “It's from Robin Hood!” More than once his character is referred to in this manner, a ruthless exploitation of his former glory.

Errol Flynn never had to dance around a sillier role. He's forced to dress up like Santa Claus *and* Humphrey Bogart—a star forced to impersonate a star!—and Bogie's voice is superimposed over his own to complete the impersonation. Throughout, he's trying to woo his former wife back and, of course, in the end, he does get her, but his main task is just to survive the movie without looking too foolish. *Never Say Goodbye* is the handwriting on Flynn's wall. Warner Bros. was obviously dealing with a problem: What should they do with Errol Flynn now that his offscreen reputation has been tarnished by both his lack of war service *and* his sexual exploits?

By 1948, when Flynn appeared in *Silver River*, a Raoul Walsh western with Ann Sheridan as his co-star, his offscreen life was becoming apparent on his face. He's still handsome, but not *très* perfect the way he was, not youthful and slim or energetic. He's slightly puffy around the eyes, and the start of jowls can be observed. His face is broader, his eyes deader, his body thicker. He's not yet fat, nor unglamorous. But he's not the Errol Flynn of *The Adventures of Robin Hood*.

By 1950, after fifteen years on top, Flynn's career was adrift. In 1951, he made a film (*Hello, God*) which received no United States release, an unthinkable event for a studio star. In 1952 and 1953, he made four movies that were pale imitations of his former successes: *The Adventures of Captain Fabian*, a riff on *Captain Blood*; *Mara Maru*, a modern story about sunken treasure; *Against All Flags*, his last effective swashbuckler, with pirates, Maureen O'Hara, and lots of sly

references to Flynn's persona; and *The Master of Ballantrae*, based on Robert Louis Stevenson's historical novel set in Scotland. By the mid-1950s, however, Flynn looked worn and dissipated, and his hard lifestyle was obviously robbing him of a movie star's most precious assets—good looks and physical grace.

Flynn stopped living in Hollywood around 1952 and would eventually leave Warners, saying bitterly, "My eighteen-year-long affair with Warner Bros. came to an end ... Most people who work for a company for so long a time get some recognition. My recognition, in 1952, when I was ending my service with Warners, came in the form of a letter accusing me of a breach of contract, holding up the company, and general bad behavior ... They were trying to get rid of their star roster ... by trying to force the stars to break their contracts." He also granted a somewhat sad magazine interview, in which he mused, "I get the feeling that life is slipping by me ... the time is passing and I am not living fully." The time was passing, but he was living *too* fully.

Disillusioned and discouraged, Flynn decided to take his career into his own hands. He hired a new manager (Barry Mahon), created Errol Flynn Pictures, and sailed to Europe, where his popularity had remained steady. His first venture, *Crossed Swords*, co-starred him with Gina Lollobrigida. It was released in 1954 and greeted as an obvious—but unsuccessful—attempt to revive the joy and pizzazz of the 1930s Flynn swashbucklers. Undiscouraged, and happy with his new career control, Flynn was inspired to undertake an epic film that would re-create the story of the legendary Swiss hero William Tell.

Flynn saw the project as the opportunity to prove he was more than a good-looking movie star. He decided to shoot his movie in CinemaScope (a new and "hot" process in 1954), and he hired Jack Cardiff, a highly respected cinematographer, to both shoot *and* direct. Cardiff, who had photographed beautiful color films such as *The Red Shoes* (1948) and *Black Narcissus* (1947), would be making his directorial debut. Along with himself in the title role, Flynn cast his old friend Bruce Cabot as the villain, and Italian actors Aldo Fabrizi and Antonella Lualdi to co-star. To finance the ambitious

project, Flynn proved his commitment by putting up half the budget (\$430,000) with his own money. He secured a second \$210,000 from an Italian backer named Count Fossataro (a name right out of a Roger Corman medieval horror film). For the remaining funding, Flynn, whose reputation as a charmer wasn't just publicity hype, talked the Italian government into providing \$145,000. With cast, crew, and funding in place, Errol Flynn embarked happily on *William Tell* with great optimism.

For a few weeks, everything went well, and thirty minutes of the movie were put in the can. Then the bottom dropped out. Flynn was informed all the money was gone—spent—kaput. Fossataro's checks started bouncing sky high. There was no way to continue unless more money could be found immediately. Flynn, in a state of shock, undertook the search for additional financing, and as he moved forward, bad news started coming in. First, Flynn's business manager, Al Blum, who had just died of cancer, had spent all Flynn's money on one last glorious binge. ("Tell Errol I'm sorry," were Blum's dying words.) Next, the IRS informed Flynn he owed over \$800,000 in back taxes. This was followed by betrayal from his old friend Cabot, who, impatient to be paid, sued for his salary and had Flynn's car and his wife's clothing confiscated as collateral. As these events hit him within days of one another, Flynn collapsed, ill with jaundice, and while he recovered, all the cameras, film stock, and equipment were seized by the local bailiffs.

Flynn ultimately began the melancholy task of trying to save *William Tell*. He tried to gain funding from Warner Bros., from old friends, from other investors, but everything failed. Not only was the movie without funding, but Flynn himself was strapped for daily living expenses. He needed cash. Ever resourceful, he went on a quiz show entitled *The Big Surprise* and—big surprise!—won \$30,000 by proving he truly was an expert seaman by answering nautical questions. (He also raised money to live on by renting his yacht, the *Zaca*, to Mary Pickford and Buddy Rogers.)

Flynn finally realized that *William Tell* was never to be. According to his friends, the failure of this project did something to Flynn that he never fully got over. It was worse than the rape trial

in that it connected directly to his sense of himself as an artist. It also represented betrayal by friends and backers he had trusted; he felt like a fool. The result of his attempt to come into his own as a filmmaker ended up as thirty minutes of a movie that exists somewhere—no one knows where—an uncompleted half hour of Flynn that no one has ever seen, his financial undoing, the “lost *William Tell*.”

Hovering near bankruptcy and desperate for cash, Flynn accepted an offer from producer Herbert Wilcox to appear in two movies opposite the popular British film star Anna Neagle. Wilcox, who was married to Neagle, offered Flynn the sum of \$25,000, and Flynn was happy to take it. The two films were *Lilacs in the Spring* (retitled *Let's Make Up* in the United States) in 1954 and *King's Rhapsody* in 1955.

In *Lilacs*, Flynn and Neagle have both seen better days and certainly better projects. Yet they suit up and gamely carry out their tasks like the professionals they are. Neagle, playing a musical comedy star, chugs to cross a cavernous dance floor, steering a bored-looking partner through a grim tango that's more concerned with destination than passion. Later, she thumps out a lead-footed Charleston on top of a marble table. For his part, Flynn—still looking good but thicker in face and waistline—exits and enters the frame as if he's breezing through on his way somewhere else, a “hello, I must be going” kind of appearance. He's the White Rabbit, and she's the Grand Lady, yet they do what a film star's gotta do—the job. They have one golden scene in which they perform a little soft-shoe, a music hall song-and-dance to “Lily of Laguna,” itself a product that had seen better days. Flynn and Neagle give it all the charm and style and personality that made them both stars. While she glows and radiates like a young girl, Flynn cocks his hat, stuffs his hands in his pockets, and proves that despite everything that's happened to him, he still knows how to have fun on film.*



Flynn's career was on an upturn when he undertook a quality role in *The Sun Also Rises* (with Ava Gardner), playing a mature version of his original jaunty and charming persona.

Lilacs in the Spring did reasonably well in England, but *King's Rhapsody*, a Ruritanian romance based on one of Ivor Novello's last plays, was greeted with yawns.

The Flynn luck held, however. So he looked older than he was, and like a soggy alcoholic? Great. He could play soggy old alcoholics. By turning to what amounted to supporting roles that exploited his reputation, he found critical acclaim and positive audience reaction in three final prestige movies: *The Sun Also Rises* in 1957, in which he plays the alcoholic Mike Campbell; a glorious turn as his old friend John Barrymore in *Too Much, Too Soon*, based on Diana Barrymore's autobiography (1958); and also in 1958, the role of a disillusioned British deserter in John Huston's film of *The Roots of Heaven*. In all three films, he's more or less playing a drunk. Sadly, he looks the part. Yet he played well, with a touching, rueful honesty, and it seemed as if he might be making a new beginning and be able to restructure his star presence to accept age, taking on

strong supporting roles that no longer required his youthful energy. Patrice Wymore said that Flynn welcomed these new roles openly. “He was tired of being the swashbuckler with a beautiful woman on one arm and a saber in the other and a charging steed underneath ... He really wanted to be accepted as a serious actor ... that would have pleased him so much: to have been recognized as a serious actor.” It looked as if it might happen, as his fans stayed with him and new ones began to appreciate him. Flynn started to become a cult figure, and when he revealed himself frankly and openly in his witty, self-written autobiography, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*, in 1957, he was celebrated for his candor and graceful prose. A future of character roles—even a writing career—seemed to lie ahead.



Errol Flynn at the end, in an unretouched photo.

Alas, it was not to be. Errol Flynn, the glamour boy of the 1930s, the delightful, delicious swashbuckling hero of grace, style, and wit, made only one more movie. It was the 1959 film from Exploit Films that has become a cult joke, *Cuban Rebel Girls*. For those who love Errol Flynn, it's better not to see it. It's not just the thin hair, the

sagging chin, the rather bulbous nose, the wrinkled neck, and the straggly mustache. It's his eyes. Once sparkling, full of life and mischief, with little golden flecks that gave off light, his eyes look not only dead, but sad. Really, really sad.

In his autobiography, he had tried to look back and, while still maintaining his cheerful air, understand what had happened to him. He made an attempt to evaluate his career. "Someone discovered I could look dashing pointing a sword, and bound that sword to my wrist for two decades ... I don't know whether I can convey how deep the yearning is of an actor who has been stereotyped, who has that sword and horse wound around him, to prove to himself and to others he is an actor ... I wonder if you can imagine what it might mean to one who believes that given the chance at good and great roles, he might be able to act ... but never to be given the chance. Only to be given those surefire box office attractions—entertainment pictures that often didn't even entertain—action, action, action."

In the end, Errol Flynn paid the piper, died young, but never let his audience down by playing his life as anything but a lark. If his role was Errol Flynn, then he was jolly well going to *be* Errol Flynn. He tried to give the public the Errol Flynn he believed *they* believed he was. In a radio interview given shortly before he died, Flynn summed up: "I've had a hell of a lot of fun, and I've enjoyed it ... every minute of it." Let's hope so. Flynn died on October 14, 1959, at the age of fifty. The doctor who examined him said he had the body of a seventy-year-old man.

* Legends are legends. This location also has been identified as the Top Hat Malt Shop, or Top's Cafe, the Safety Drug store soft-drink counter, or Schwab's Drugstore. Turner scholar Lou Valentino believes it to have been Top's Cafe, which was located at 6750 Sunset Boulevard, and he is usually right. Although the "Lana Legend" later shifted it to the more famous Schwab's, that establishment was more than two miles from Hollywood High. It's unlikely Turner could "run across the street" between classes there. Lana herself said she couldn't remember for sure what the name of the place was, but that whatever she was drinking, "it had to be a nickel drink" because she couldn't have afforded anything else.

† It was said she went to convent school and was a cheerleader in junior high. The reason the family had migrated to Los Angeles was not poverty, but her mother's "chest trouble."

* Turner did return to musicals after she became a big star, making *Mr. Imperium* (1951), *The Merry Widow* remake in 1952, and *Latin Lovers*, all before she left MGM. She also sang and danced on TV, on *The Dinah Shore Show*, *The Milton Berle Show*, and others. Clips exist of Turner re-creating Judy Garland's famous "Madame Krematon" number (1946 *Ziegfeld Follies*) on Ed Sullivan's February 14, 1954, *Toast of the Town*. Turner is surrounded by her "chorus boys"—Steve Forrest, Edmund Purdom, Richard Anderson, and John Ericson—and performs the number carefully but creditably as part of a Sullivan show tribute to the thirtieth anniversary of MGM. When Turner toured with Bob Hope for his 1963 Christmas visit to overseas military bases, she brought down the house when she partnered Hope in a spirited bossa nova number (later televised). On-screen, her singing was dubbed—by Trudy Erwin in *Mr. Imperium* and *Merry Widow*, and by Diana Coupland in *Betrayed* (1954).

* Turner understood what was happening to her. Later she said, "When we started shooting, I had a small part. But as we went along, I kept getting more rewrites. Suddenly, it was *my* film. All the dramatic parts were put in for *me*. I was thrilled."

* Turner turned twenty on February 8, 1940. She eloped with Shaw on February 14.

* Reminiscing in a 1997 article, Hunt told how Turner earnestly asked her, "How do you know when you're really in ... love? How can you tell it's real?"

* Her famous co-star, Robert Taylor, said of her, "I couldn't take my eyes off her, and there were times during *Johnny Eager* when I thought I'd explode ... She was the type of woman for whom a guy would risk five years in jail for rape. I don't think she knew how to talk without being sexy. When she said 'Good morning,' I melted."

* This issue would have been on the newsstands by December 20, 1946.

* What's even sadder is that the life they've both worked so hard to achieve, the stardom they represent, is itself about to be over, too. Lana and Ty were vintage 1947, and they were standing on the brink of the collapse of the studio system. Within less than ten years, nothing they worked for would be there for them in the same way, and not just because they got older. Everything they understood to be reality was doomed.

* The drama of her first appearance on-screen is heightened by the effect of having her sit in a darkened carriage, giving the audience a sense of an apparition beyond life, a mysterious creature in the dark. When Turner finally *does* lean slowly forward into the light—and the Technicolor—audiences were not jerked out of their mood and back to earth. She *was* unreal. A proper goddess.

* Although Topping was Turner's third husband, it was her fourth marriage.

* *Betrayed* is stolen by Victor Mature, that underrated actor of maximum flamboyance who did so much to inject humor and life into so many dying films. Playing the dashing guerrilla leader who blows up bridges, kills Germans, and generally has a high old time of it before he's revealed as a villainous traitor, Mature delivers what might stand as the definitive line regarding his own film career: "I'm in this strictly for laughs."

* Considering Turner's overall marital record, her marriage to Lex Barker had been long and relatively steady—four years out of the headlines.

* This film was shot *after Diane*, which was made at MGM. *Rains*, a 20th Century–Fox movie, was released, however, before *Diane*. *Diane* was released in December 1955.

* The novel *Peyton Place*, like *Forever Amber* before it, was *the* sensational best seller of its day, packed with sex and sin at a time when such things were not available at every corner newsstand. Grace Metalious made a fortune with the book, which purported to tell all about the secret lives of the citizens in a small New England town. ("There ain't nobody livin' intelligently in this town—*nobody*.")

† Dates in all cases reflect dates of newspaper item.

* What the press could not cover, however, was that Cheryl Crane grew up to be a responsible businesswoman. After a difficult period of internment in juvenile prison and years of analysis, she matured and settled down. The press also did not cover Lana Turner's genuine anguish, nor her attempts to help Cheryl over the years. What has not been written is that mother and daughter remained lifelong friends, and that Lana Turner was fiercely proud of her only child, Cheryl Christina Crane.

* His stage name was Ronald Dante; the name Lana Turner assumed was real and was the one he continued to be known by.

† She found it just as things looked hopeless, early in 1971. Turner was approached about the possibility of appearing in summer stock. She was invited to star in the popular Broadway comedy *Forty Carats*, the story of a forty-year-old woman who falls in love with a much younger man. Having become a shrewd businesswoman, Turner forged a deal that brought her nearly \$200,000 plus the guarantee of salaries for her personal hairdresser, makeup man, and chauffeur, and a limousine.

* She would make two more totally awful movies, *Bittersweet Love* (1976) and *Witches' Brew* (1980). Her final movie role is that of a veteran witch.

* Barbara Stanwyck, Flynn's co-star in *Cry Wolf* (1947), was known to have high standards for professional behavior. Of Flynn she said, "People say terrible things about Errol Flynn. I

never worked with anybody nicer. He was on time, he knew his lines, he was a perfect gentleman.”

* His mother, with whom he had a complicated relationship, once told British reporters that “Errol was a nasty little boy.”

* Smith is supposed to be the point of a love triangle between Flynn and his co-star, Fred MacMurray. The real love triangle is a professional one, involving Flynn, MacMurray, and Ralph Bellamy, all struggling to figure out why pilots black out during dive bombing.

† They also co-starred in *Four’s a Crowd* (1938) and *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939).

* Richard Schickel described Flynn on-screen as “using the act of love as an act of aggression.” This sets Flynn aside from popular leading men like Charles Boyer and William Powell, who could banter and tease, but who, unless cast as villains, projected no negatively aggressive traits.

* Flynn remained at Warners until 1949.

* And yet Flynn was a perfect male fashion plate. Whenever he plays in a modern drama, he is impeccably tailored in well-cut suits made from fabrics you can practically feel. He’s 3-D in fashion. Flynn is one of the best dressed of the male superstars of the golden era, and he has a better body than most. (Gable, another amazingly costumed male, has both period and modern suits cut to his figure perfectly, and he always looks great. But Gable is short, rather high-waisted, and his suits have to compensate accordingly.) Gary Cooper, one of the most beautiful men ever on the screen, is very tall and lean but could also wear anything and look fabulous. However, he was seldom cast in the “I am a hunk but also a fashion plate” kind of roles after his early years. Today, male stars are never about tailoring, but always about costuming. Actors like Russell Crowe, Harrison Ford, Mel Gibson, and even Tom Cruise are not tailored to a fare-thee-well unless for some reason it is necessary for their character. Perhaps the modern well-dressed actor is Michael Douglas, but only because many of his roles cast him as the modern-day successful man: *Wall Street* (1987), the remake of *Dial M for Murder* (retitled *A Perfect Murder*, 1998), and *Fatal Attraction* (1987).

* Walsh always allowed Flynn to be a loose, slightly comic hero. In his Curtiz movies, Flynn’s more romanticized, a British gentleman. He’s not without humor, but has a definite set of values to be defended. Walsh allowed Flynn the margin of self-mockery.

* He had also made the popular World War I air force movie *The Dawn Patrol* in 1938.

* England had not forgotten its animosity toward Flynn about *Objective, Burma!* To offset any audience bad feeling, *Lilacs in the Spring* makes light of it. When Neagle is off to the Far East to entertain the troops, her Cockney friend jokingly says, “Give my love to Errol Flynn if you see ’im in Burma!” Flynn’s character (an Errol Flynn-ish movie star) says she won’t need pajamas in Burma because “It’s too hot ... and *I* should know!”

DEFECTION: DEANNA DURBIN AND JEAN ARTHUR

DEANNA DURBIN



Deanna Durbin

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Edna Mae. She was born in Winnipeg, Canada, on December 4, 1921, to an ordinary family who moved to Los Angeles, California, when she was about one year old. Years later, when she was about twenty-eight years old, Edna Mae married and moved to a little French village called Neauphle-le-Château, where she lived happily ever after. After Winnipeg and before the French village, however, Edna Mae lived the life of a princess. She was a movie star named Deanna Durbin.

This is a true story even though it sounds like a fairy tale. In fact, the career of Deanna Durbin is a fairy tale with no parallel in movie history. It began with a bang in 1936 and ended unexpectedly in 1948. Her original success was so sudden that she can actually qualify as a bona fide member of that dubious category “overnight sensation,” and her ultimate stardom was so large that she has often been credited with “single-handedly” saving Universal Pictures from financial ruin. She appeared in twenty-one feature films in eleven years, and most of them were certified box office bonanzas since they weren’t especially expensive to make. She had a very distinctive movie type—that of a feisty Little Miss Fix-It, a peculiarly American form of Cinderella. Rich or poor, small town or big city, with loving parents or distanced ones, she lived on-screen in a happy-ending plot, surrounded by lavish production values and easily finding an excuse to burst into beautiful, glorious song. This, it was assumed, was the story of her life, and it *was* the story of her life—up to a point.

Durbin’s career illustrates the star system in its purest form as well as its most romantic evocation. She had real talent, fortuitous accidents of fate, careful publicity, campaigns that built fan interest, casting that shaped her movie type so a formulaic story pattern could be determined, mass audience appeal, studio backing, and, of

course, the bottom line of it all: work, work, work that capitalized on the public's initial interest and generated lots of money, money, money.

The creation of Deanna Durbin is a quintessential example of the down-to-earth business know-how of the movie star-making machine. The 1930s were a popular time for young stars, especially ones who could sing and dance, so in and of itself, her rise wasn't that unusual. The audience of the time wanted to be reassured that youth could prevail, that there was hope for the future. They liked kids. Of course, movie audiences had always liked kids, dating back to Mary Pickford and forward through the Jackies, both Coogan and Cooper, and the monumental child star fame of Shirley Temple, whose career was already under way when Durbin's began. But in the 1930s, there were more children in the film business than ever before. Not only were there child stars, but also star "teenage" characters in series films like *Andy Hardy* and *Nancy Drew* (and Henry Aldrich and Corliss Archer on radio). (The last hurrah for really big child stardom in the movies was Margaret O'Brien in the 1940s, until the trend more or less pooped out, only to be revived with a vengeance by television in the 1950s, when every sitcom had its kids, and carried over today with shows on the Disney Channel.) But Deanna Durbin was unusual. She was an authentic movie star in the days when stardom counted. She aged gracefully, had real singing talent, and could easily have continued in show business, but she opted out. She up and quit the Hollywood rat race at the age of twenty-seven, never to return. She just walked away. When her last film was released in 1948, she made a firm statement: "I'm tired of playing little girls. I'm a woman now. I can't run around forever being the Little Miss Fix-It who bursts into song. I want to get out of Hollywood and get a fresh approach."

Since Durbin's name is not particularly well known today, it's important to realize how big she was. Her very first feature, *Three Smart Girls*, launched her as if she were already a star even though she wasn't yet fifteen years old. The audience's immediate acceptance confirmed the studio's confidence. By the time she was sixteen, legions of fan clubs—the Deanna Durbin Devotees—had

sprung up all over the country. These clubs published a quarterly diary that reported every activity Durbin undertook. Products were created in her name and carried her likeness on them: dolls, paper dolls, coloring books, toys, school supplies, recordings, and teenage fashions. She became the only female Boy Scout in the world when Troop 42 of San Diego made her an honorary member. She was presented with the key to New York City by Mayor Fiorello La Guardia. She was the number-one box office star of British cinema and an honorary colonel in the U.S. Army Air Force. Her footprints were set in stone at Grauman's Chinese Theatre, and she was awarded a special "juvenile" Oscar by the Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Academy. By 1940, she was Universal's top box office star. Her story could be—and is—the definitive story of the successful development of a movie star, except for one thing: the ending.

Deanna Durbin is the real Greta Garbo. Garbo left show business partly by accident and spent the rest of her life hanging around famous people, sitting in her apartment, and starring in the role of Very Public Recluse. Durbin, however, disappeared into a farmhouse in rural France, and that was the last anyone has seen of her.

IT ALL BEGAN sometime in early 1935 when Edna Mae Durbin was thirteen years old. Edna Mae lived in Los Angeles, which was a company town, and the company was Hollywood. Because she had a beautiful voice and loved to sing, she began taking serious voice lessons at the Ralph Thomas Academy while in elementary school. Thomas staged programs to showcase his students and recruit new ones, and Edna Mae, a prize pupil, had already been featured in the academy's regular recitals and as a soloist at various Los Angeles clubs and churches. In the meantime, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was planning to make a "biopic" based on the life of the famous opera star Madame Ernestine Schumann-Heink. The movie, to be called *Gram*, was scheduled for 1935 release, and preparation was solidly under way. The script called for a lovely young girl who could play Schumann-Heink as a child, and naturally the girl would have to be able to sing well enough to portray a future opera star. MGM's

casting director, Rufus LeMaire, was pulling his hair out looking for such a girl. He had exhausted his list of professional teenage singers, having auditioned and/or tested nearly everyone in town, when a friend told him about the Ralph Thomas school and the little girl he had heard sing there. Edna Mae Durbin was thus called in to audition for Metro, where she sang “Il Bacio,” first for LeMaire, then for the studio’s vocal coach, and ultimately for Louis B. Mayer. When the vocal coach had her sound her scales, he was stunned and told Mayer her voice was already that of a mature soprano. Edna Mae Durbin was signed to a six-month contract, with her first picture to be *Gram*.

Since Edna Mae Durbin was a trained singer performing in the Los Angeles area, and since she was a pretty and vivacious little girl, the story so far is not all that remarkable. She was right under the noses of studio talent scouts and casting directors. Furthermore, she wasn’t just some pretty beauty contest winner—she had talent. MGM risked little by putting her under a low-level step contract, particularly since they were hiring her for a specific role. Everyone knew she could give value for the money they were paying, and Louis B. Mayer himself directed her “renaming” process. Durbin was all right, but “Edna Mae” was too ordinary. She was sometimes called “Deedee” at home, and everyone thought matching initials would be attractive for an actress’s name. Edna Mae liked the name “Diana,” but she pronounced it “Dee-anna” and a sharp-eared publicity man jumped on the difference. “Dee-anna” would be original and have cachet. So Edna Mae Durbin, renamed Deanna Durbin, was set to go into her first feature film. To raise awareness of her talent, MGM arranged for her to sing on a national radio show, *The Los Angeles Breakfast Club*. She appeared three times and was a big hit.

The powerful MGM star machine started planting the name Deanna Durbin in the trade papers. Sometimes she was still called “Edna Mae” and not “Deanna,” and sometimes she was touted as still being only thirteen years old, the age at which she had first been given a contract. (The movie rule of thumb was to claim child

stars to be as young as possible for as long as possible. Shirley Temple's real age was kept from her public for years.) Plants with Durbin's name were first seen as early as January 3, 1936, in the *Los Angeles Herald Express*. In an article by Gene Inge entitled "Young Stars over KFAC Tonight," she is listed as one of a group of young artists who were going to be featured. Coverage of this event was guaranteed because Mickey Rooney, himself an MGM child star and already a big name, was going to be master of ceremonies. The article said, "Edna Mae Durbin, who is only 13 years of age, has a remarkable operatic voice." By May, she was described as part of Ben Alexander's Talent Parade and called both "a member of the film colony" and "a thirteen-year-old soprano." By September, MGM had her publicity running full tilt. By then she was always called Deanna Durbin. MGM press notes say such things as "warbles like Grace Moore" ... "a sweet-faced girl, who is going places" ... "acclaimed by Lily Pons as the greatest child singer of her sex" ... "has the screen presence of a Garbo and the voice of a Grace Moore" ... "Filmland's latest Cinderella girl" ... "innocent and pretty, has the sweetness associated with adolescence." Of course, no one had seen her yet, and she was scheduled for only one film, signed only to a short-term contract. That didn't stop the Metro publicity machine, because the overall promotion of Durbin was related to *Gram*.

As *Gram* was to begin shooting, however, Madame Schumann-Heink became ill, and since she was to be a consultant on the movie, the production was temporarily postponed. This left MGM paying an unknown little girl and getting no return for their cash. They decided to fill Durbin's time while she waited by placing her in a short musical film called *Every Sunday*, to be directed by Felix Feist. Her co-star was another young female Metro contract player who could also sing. Her name was Frances Gumm, but she had been renamed Judy Garland.

Garland, born June 10, 1922, had made her movie debut with her two sisters in 1929, but nothing had come of it. She auditioned for Metro more than once, and had made an MGM short, *La Fiesta*, for an August 1935 release without gaining steady work. In

September 1935, she finally signed the important “real” seven-year contract at \$100 per week. Roger Edens, who had played the piano for her at her successful audition, later recalled her as a “chunky kid in a blue middy blouse.” Garland, like Durbin, was just waiting around for her studio assignments. She later said, “They wanted you either five years old or eighteen, nothing in between. Well, I was in between, and so was little Deanna Durbin, and they didn’t know what to do with us. So we just went to school every day and wandered around the lot.” In publicity stills they were posed as two little girl pals, smiling sweetly at each other across a game table or walking arm in arm. They also posed with child star Jackie Cooper—all three earnestly pasting stamps in albums as if they were just three regular kids. Like Durbin, Garland was also singing on the radio during this time, earning her own raves. MGM shot a successful screen test of the girls together, and it was decided that while both prepared for bigger things, they could make *Every Sunday*. It was summer 1936. Deanna and Judy were both fourteen years old.*

And so it was that Deanna Durbin’s first screen appearance is a now legendary short that places her alongside another authentic movie star. *Every Sunday* is a typical formulaic short of its time: Two young girls are friends. One’s grandfather conducts an orchestra in an open-air bandshell. He’s about to lose his job because no one comes to the concerts, so the girls decide to save him. However, on the day of the big concert, there is no audience. This precipitates the big finale: The two little girls, desperate, get up and sing with “Grandpa’s” orchestra. And guess what? An audience flocks in.

There are now many apocryphal stories about *Every Sunday*. Folklore says that Metro had no idea who these two little girls really were or that either of them had any potential, and that the short was a throwaway. And yet, when you watch it, it’s clear that the power of the Hollywood star system—and its narrative skills—are in full play. The plot, the direction, the use of sets and costumes, are all first-rate, and both girls are beautifully showcased. A ninety-minute story is told in twenty minutes, with broad, simple strokes. It’s actually a condensed feature film of the “puttin’ on a show”

genre: In a montage, the little girls knock on doors to sell tickets, trade their own work skills for promises of attendance, walk around town carrying sandwich signs, and so on.

Some stories, usually told in relation to the career of Judy Garland, claim that Louis B. Mayer wanted to sign Durbin, to whom he referred as “the little girl with the big voice.” His minions assumed he meant Garland and signed *her*, letting Durbin go and infuriating Mayer, who spent the rest of his life trying to find his own version of Durbin in stars like Kathryn Grayson and Jane Powell. However, the facts are that Judy Garland was *already* under a seven-year contract, and Durbin was filling time before starting a feature film. Anyone watching today can see that *both* have great voices though different singing styles. In fact, the short is about that very thing, as Garland sings a swing number and Durbin sings an operatic solo (her audition piece, “Il Bacio”). Furthermore, it’s perfectly clear that Judy Garland, a long-range employee, is the dominant force in the story. A full character is built for her, and she carries the bulk of the narrative development. After all, she was an experienced show business brat out of Grand Rapids, Minnesota, who had been trouping since she was three years old. Durbin was an amateur. *Every Sunday* looks like a short in which MGM is featuring Garland and testing Durbin.

The girls are called Judy and Edna. (“Hey, Edna,” someone calls to Durbin, who hadn’t yet fully embraced her new name, although Frances Gumm had.) The two girls look comfortable with each other and seem naturally friendly. When Durbin is the first to stand up to sing, she uncorks a beautiful and amazing voice. Her singing is effortless, and she seems completely confident in herself, and no doubt she was. When Judy follows, she is immediately transformed from an awkward, insecure little girl into a professional who knows how to sell a song. She acts her number as well as sings it, and she’s extraordinary. She has all the polish of performance mechanics that Durbin seems blissfully unaware of. Finally, the two stand up together and share a number. Deanna Durbin, although new to movies, already looks like a radiant movie star, and Garland looks like what she was—a musical genius and totally unique female

presence. She's just *there*. She demands your attention, while Durbin assumes she has it. Durbin is more relaxed, self-contained, and detached, qualities that turned out to be her strength as she finally walked away from the business and gained a normal life. Garland, a showbiz pro, is jumpy and seems nervous, but there's a superstar presence under her skin. She wants to please and to be loved, attributes that would not only become her trademarks but that also would endear her to audiences and shape her future.

*Every Sunday** contains two huge talents, two fourteen-year-olds with amazing vocal power and clearly formed personalities, on the brink of their careers. Durbin is a beautiful young girl, slim and radiant, a born leading lady. (At this stage of her life, Garland is more of a comic sidekick, with bounce and energy, and a somewhat lumpy-looking body.) What one sees about Deanna Durbin is that she's sweet looking, pretty, and she can certainly sing. Today some people say that *Every Sunday* reveals that there's no choice between them—Garland is it. But Garland is always it; it's not for nothing she's a legend. Hindsight is at work in that assessment, because both girls are wonderful and both have tremendous potential. In her day, Durbin was just as big a star, in some ways bigger; she just lasted for a briefer period.† Because Garland became an icon and Durbin dropped her career, Durbin is usually either ignored or criticized by comparison, but she holds her own easily. Popular opinion has it that Durbin had a silly or sentimental career, forgetting that Durbin's work reflects the popular culture of its time and also forgetting that Garland had her own share of junk to muddle through. (Has anyone watched *Listen, Darling* [1938] or *Little Nellie Kelly* [1940] lately?) At the time, Deanna Durbin's enormous and immediate popularity cast a shadow over Garland, who was sometimes shaped to appear Durbinesque. For instance, in another MGM short entitled *If I Forget You*, Garland was forced to sing an obituary tribute to Will Rogers, who had died in a plane crash. She's presented in the frame dressed in a formal gown with the type of sweetheart neckline that Durbin popularized. She holds a single gardenia, and sings, "Let each forsaking heart forget that it must

beat, old friend, if we forget you.” (The “let’s throw a tribute short together” quality of this thing is revealed by the song lyrics saying “we” instead of “I.”) At the end of the short, a solemn Garland lays her gardenia at the base of a Will Rogers statue. (No one escaped schmaltz in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s.)

After the successful release of *Every Sunday* in October 1936, Durbin once again began to prepare for *Gram*. However, Madame Schumann-Heink died on November 17 at the age of seventy-five. Suddenly, MGM had no work for Durbin and no reason to keep her under contract. When her six months ended, she was dropped. Fortunately, Rufus LeMaire had just forged a deal for himself at Universal Pictures, and his new contract contained a clause that allowed him to sign personally any exceptional talent he discovered. Wisely, he snapped up Durbin, signing her for \$300 per week, even though he had no specific project for her at the time.

And so, as 1937 opened up, Deanna Durbin was under contract to Rufus LeMaire at Universal Pictures. She had been signed by a major studio at age thirteen, debuted successfully in a short film at the age of fourteen, and had just had her fifteenth birthday. During the calendar year of 1937, the star machine process would promote her heavily as she moved rapidly from almost complete obscurity to movie sensation.

At Universal, the first order of business was to find Durbin a role. The second was to continue publicizing her name. Her new studio built on the early press beginnings MGM had set up for her. Universal already had a project in the works, a film about three sisters. They had been searching their roster for someone to play the youngest. LeMaire presented his little girl with the voice, and everyone thought she might work out. For added publicity, Eddie Cantor was talked into using Durbin on his highly popular radio show. Her appearance was such a hit that he signed her to a twenty-six-week deal. Louella Parsons reported her big news, “The entire story of *Three Smart Girls* is being revamped to give little Miss Durbin a bigger and better part in a bigger and better picture.” Unlike many of Louella’s news flashes, this was true, and it was Louella herself, the Goddess of Flack, who first handed down the

Word when she wrote, shortly before the release of *Three Smart Girls*, “Better learn to pronounce Deanna Durbin’s name right now.”

The buildup of Deanna Durbin the movie star is easily traced through the fan magazines and newspapers of 1936–37. It’s a clear record of the star machine at work. The story of her life, all fifteen years of it, is subtly invented and reinvented as the studio worked out her bio. Since many people, particularly her own family, continued to call her Edna Mae, the studio used this information to create intimacy between her and her fans. Contradicting their usual format of burying a star’s real name, they came out and said she was just little Edna Mae to family, but for her friends the fans, she was this special creation, *Deanna*. Then, suddenly, Universal got the bad news: People weren’t sure how to pronounce it. Was she Diana or Dee-anna? Never caught short, the publicity flacks went into high gear creating articles with appropriate instructions and charming anecdotes about how she made the original mistake herself, she being a little naïve and confused, just like her own public. (Naturally, the flacks weren’t going to take any responsibility.) Her father was first said to be apprenticed in an ironworks. (He was a machinist.) Then he was upgraded to the inexplicable job of blacksmith, which the studio thought sounded more democratic and folksy. Confused, Mr. Durbin asked Universal bosses what he should give as his occupation when people asked. “Hell, tell ’em you’re a real estate broker. Everyone else in Los Angeles is,” he was reportedly told.* Right after the release of Durbin’s first feature, he got a real boost in stature when he became her “stockbroker father” who had moved his family from Canada to California because of his poor health (*not*, it was implied, to put his little girl to work to earn the family bread, which was true). In press releases, Durbin stayed thirteen for two years or more, but young as she was, her throat, according to specialists called in by Universal, “was fully developed.” She was given a typical fan magazine “personality”—she was “constantly eating apples,” and she liked to skate and eat spaghetti. The real love of her life was Tippy, her cocker spaniel.



Durbin's first movie, *Three Smart Girls*, made her one of the few legitimate "overnight successes" in Hollywood: (*top*) with Barbara Read and Nan Grey, her "sisters"; and (*bottom*) with Charles Winninger, her "daddy."



All this paid off. By the end of 1936, after she had turned fifteen, Durbin's first feature was previewed.[†] It had cost \$319,107 to make and made \$1.6 million at the box office. (Durbin had been paid \$20,000.) The newcomer was immediately listed as one of the ten greatest discoveries of the year by the *Los Angeles Examiner*, which wouldn't have happened if her first movie hadn't been a blockbuster. The huge success of *Three Smart Girls* made it perfectly clear that Universal Pictures had a star in Deanna Durbin. As shooting on the film had progressed, Universal, realizing she was a natural, had indeed expanded her part. Seldom has any unknown been given the confident introduction to the public that marked Durbin's debut. Right from the credits, it's all about Deanna Durbin. The title card announces "*Three Smart Girls* with Binnie Barnes, Alice Brady, Ray Milland, Charles Winninger, Mischa Auer." After that, the usual lineup of production credits appear, and then—ta da!—in a break with tradition, the credits read: "with the *Three Smart Girls*, Nan Grey as Joan, Barbara Read as Kay ... and ... Universal's New Discovery, Deanna Durbin as 'Penny.'" It was a twenty-one-gun salute. If the public hadn't taken to Durbin, her career would have been eradicated on the spot and the movie buried in Alaska.

The opening shot of *Three Smart Girls* is of Deanna Durbin. It's a medium close-up, and she's singing her head off. Furthermore, the shot is held long enough for the audience to get a good look at "Universal's New Discovery." Durbin is wearing a jaunty sailor cap on the back of her head, a striped T-shirt, and shorts. Her hair is parted in the middle in the simplest youthful style of the 1930s, with little curls on both sides of her face. She is radiant, youthful, charming, and totally relaxed. And she can sing "On the Wings of Song" absolutely on pitch and with a bright smile. This is more than a star buildup—it's the serving up of a talent on a silver platter, with no doubt whatsoever that the public will buy. Deanna Durbin sparkles, sings with joy, and seems perfectly at ease in front of a camera that has to be only inches from her teenaged nose. *Everybody* saw it—Deanna Durbin was "a natural."

Three Smart Girls is one smart movie. It's a small story about three young girls who leave their home in Switzerland to travel to New York to "save" their father (Winner) from remarriage to a gold-digging sophisticate (Barnes). The older two sisters fall in love along the way, and that's pretty much the whole plot. No more is needed for Durbin to capture the audience's heart. Taking no chances in the usual studio manner, Universal surrounded newcomer Durbin with class-A support from experienced character actors like Lucile Watson (in a minuscule role, but there when needed), Winner, Auer, and the dead-on talents of Alice Brady and the ever-fabulous Binnie Barnes playing a mother-daughter team of predators. They are hilarious, swanning around with cigarette holders, feathers on their heads, and jewels at their throats. Brady is a mom who never lets up looking for an ever-richer meal ticket, and Barnes, wearing leopard skin and solid gold, makes a perfect jungle stalker let loose on the nightclub circuit.

Universal gave everyone in the cast stylish clothes and sassy dialogue. The sets were cavernous, with all-white furniture and moderne fixtures. Butlers were everywhere, and price tags were read aloud for the Depression-era crowd. ("This ring is only \$7,000," oozes Franklin Pangborn, a jewelry salesman.) And there were other assets, such as the handsome young leading man, Ray Milland, getting his own feet on the ground as a potential movie star. Durbin is the sparkling diamond in an excellent setting, flawlessly presented. She has real star quality. Her eyes are expressive, showing honest responses—delight, fun, sorrow, regret. The public ate her up. She sings three songs well, provides comedy relief, and plays a character that will remain with her and become her movie type: a strong-willed, smart little girl who can not only get what she wants, but who can get other people to hand it over to her with a smile. This character could easily have been hateful, but Durbin knows how to make it charming. ("I'm not pigheaded," she explains. "I'm strong-willed.") For an amateur, Durbin is impressive. She plays her part well, only occasionally going over the top and losing control. Twice she's asked to act really angry, and she hits it too hard, becoming shrill, but it's an amateur's mistake.

Looking at the movie's structure, it's obvious that Durbin's part was originally less important. Although the movie opens and ends with a close-up of Durbin, she drops out of the action for a long time in between while the plot favors the middle sister, played by Barbara Read. This sets up an interesting question: When did Universal realize it would be Durbin, not Read, who would be their new star? Read is cute, and she's competent. She has everything it takes for stardom except that thing no one can ever define. Read, in fact, looks a great deal like Durbin, although she isn't as pretty. Her eyes are too close together, and her face is a bit plump when photographed. When Durbin is on-screen, Read disappears. And she can't sing.

After this wonderful first success, Durbin could still have disappeared had Universal not been smart. Given the enormous popularity of her character, Penny, in *Three Smart Girls*, her studio might have used her callously by dooming her to an *Andy Hardy*-like serialized future, with each movie getting cheaper until they petered out. (In fact, later on, there would be two more "Penny" films, one made after she was grown up.) But the businessmen at Universal knew she could become more valuable to them in the long run if they developed *her* (Deanna Durbin) as the star, linking her private self to her character Penny. They created a perfect second film for her, demonstrating the genius of the movie business in a lesson called *How to Change Things While Leaving Things Exactly the Same*. The goal was to develop a star. The new story moved her neatly away from the wealthy world of *Three Smart Girls* but kept her fundamental character intact. Instead of Penny, she would be Patty. Instead of being rich, she would be poor. Otherwise, everything could be the same. She'd have a daddy she needed to worry about and take care of. She would be a Little Miss Fix-It. And, needless to say, she would sing. Her type had been defined in her first film role, a clever short-circuiting of the type search.

The title of Durbin's next film, *One Hundred Men and a Girl* (1937), cleverly retains the "girl" from her first film, and equally cleverly establishes her importance in the story. There would be one hundred men, but only *one* girl. Production would be rushed to

capitalize on Durbin's hot name, and she alone would be heavily promoted. The budget would be low—no need to overspend on a second feature, in case she turned out to be a fluke, and besides, she was to be poor in this one, not rich. (Of course, that doesn't mean that rich people wouldn't be in the plot.)

One Hundred Men and a Girl is a movie shaped by the Depression. It tells the story of a group of out-of-work classical musicians, one of whom (Adolphe Menjou) has a little daughter. The seriousness with which everyone viewed Deanna Durbin is revealed by the casting of one of her co-stars, none other than the great conductor Leopold Stokowski. He plays himself in the José Iturbi mode before there was an José Iturbi mode. (Stokowski was a late-1930s idea of an intellectual glamour boy. At the time, he was thought to be sexy, an astonishing concept in today's marketplace of teenage hunks.) However, the movie's credits tell us what everyone really was thinking: "Deanna Durbin in *One Hundred Men and a Girl*." It was the little girl that mattered, so she was given the coveted "above the title" star billing. Everyone else, including Stokowski, follows the dreadful word *with*. The credits do give the maestro his due, saying "with Stokowski conducting music from Wagner's *Lohengrin*, Tchaikovsky's *5th Symphony*, Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody*, Mozart's *Exultate Jubilate*, and Verdi's *La Traviata*." He would conduct and say a few lines in one or two key scenes, but it was going to be Durbin's movie. Universal figured she could carry the longhairs and put them over in the sticks.

One Hundred Men and a Girl cements the Durbin narrative pattern. Within a few minutes of running time, she should be singing, and when she sings, all forward plot movement should stop. There will be a tight, fast-paced story, in which Durbin will solve all problems for the grown-ups, make some mistakes, be doubted, and have to cry a little or be hurt a little before the whole thing sorts out. The film will end with her singing in radiant close-up. *One Hundred Men and a Girl* does all this, and all elements of the production are directed toward her. A little beanie she wears, for example, has been carefully designed to look pert and youthful, and to flatter her face and suit the economic status of her character. It's

just a little beanie, yet it has three astonishing feathers laid backward on its top. They stick up, like a windswept wave riding her head. This means no one in the audience will really look anywhere but at her. Forget about any scene stealing by Menjou or Stokowski or even character actor Billy Gilbert. Furthermore, the little hat with the feathers is used more than once as a comedy device. When Durbin is busily sneaking into the theatre where Stokowski is rehearsing, she drops to her hands and knees so the watchman can't see her. He can, however, follow her feathers. The hat becomes a flattering costume, a comedy prop, a character metaphor, and a Deanna Durbin tracking device.

After *One Hundred Men and a Girl*—a huge success to equal *Three Smart Girls*—Deanna Durbin had made two big hits in little over one year. Joe Pasternak, her producer, knew she was a phenomenon. “She is one of those personalities,” he said, “that the world will insist on regarding as its private property.” In other words, she wasn't just a cute kid. She was going to be a *real* movie star, and in the Hollywood of the 1930s, that meant money. Her fan mail was pouring in and was closely read daily by the studio publicity department.* The requests for Deanna autographs—for which someone else signed her name on a photo†—were counted, as were the number of letters about each movie. The sale of Durbin photos and autographs (which were at first offered free and then for twenty-five cents as her popularity soared) was monitored, along with the number of endorsements requested, the numbers of fan magazine covers and articles that appeared, and the sales figures for each of her Deanna Durbin name products: paper dolls, coloring books, and porcelain dolls. Her fan clubs were especially monitored because the Durbin clubs were among the best organized and most loyal of any that were formed. (Fan clubs played an important role in helping studios expand star popularity and define its sources.)

Durbin started out in movies already conveniently and successfully typecast. She herself later showed how well she understood her own appeal: “Just as a Hollywood pinup represents sex to dissatisfied erotics, so I represented the ideal daughter

millions of fathers and mothers wished they had.” Her first three films bear this out. In *Three Smart Girls*, she reunites her divorced father and mother. She charms and cajoles, lies and manipulates, and succeeds. She sings three songs. In *One Hundred Men and a Girl*, she wants her father’s out-of-work orchestra to play with Leopold Stokowski. She charms and cajoles, lies and manipulates, and succeeds. She sings four songs. In *Mad About Music* (1938), she would want her “pretend” father to marry her actress mother. She would charm and cajole, lie and manipulate, and succeed. She would sing five songs. All that changed was the number of songs she sang.

This pattern would be followed in all of Deanna Durbin’s movies. Even when she aged, and fixing things up for parents no longer seemed viable, she would fix up things for other people (foreign correspondents, war orphans, dying old millionaires, et cetera) or even herself (launching her career, trapping her man, et cetera). Along the way, devoted, grateful, and admiring people would help her, always realizing her true worth no matter what kind of shenanigans she might be pulling. In her last film—in which she sang five songs—her “fix-it” team included a bunch of senators, a Supreme Court justice, and even the president of the United States. To fans, it seemed logical that such people would want to help Deanna Durbin.

The main thing, of course, was always finding the excuse—and the right moment—for her singing. Durbin’s voice was crystal clear and lyrically beautiful. She knew how to put over a song effortlessly, be it operatic or popular, and when she sang—radiating genuine pleasure—everything would suddenly turn her way in the plot. People who were getting ready to throw her out kept her. Grumps who hated her suddenly loved her. Handsome and rich men who had ignored her fell in love with her. The vocalizing of Deanna Durbin was the most effective *deus ex machina* the movies ever had.

Universal shrewdly understood that no one really cared *why* she sang, they just wanted her to do it. Her musical interludes were thus usually quite simple. She mounted a stage and sang. Occasionally, her numbers were integrated into the plot, as when she bicycles

along in *Mad About Music* singing “I Love to Whistle,” or drives her little carriage, her horses prancing along in rhythm, while she sings the title song in *Can’t Help Singing* (1944), but more often than not, she just got up and sang.*

Durbin’s studio also understood that when she sang, people didn’t want to be distracted. No singing to animated animals, please, and no dancing troupes gyrating behind her. (Durbin seldom danced. Her musicals usually presented her and her alone as the musical presence, except at the very end of her career, when she was paired with Donald O’Connor in *Something in the Wind* [1947], and with Dick Haymes in *Up in Central Park* [1948].) Her music was the deepest source of her intimacy with her audience. The happiness with which she sang, the charm of her voice, and the warmth with which she interpreted lyrics took her out of the frame and put her in touch with viewers. Her numbers were solos that she seemed to sing to each individual. She had the ability to connect, to create some secret pocket of existence that individuals in the audience thought only they occupied. (Most stars do this through a slight form of irony, or mockery—a third dimension of reality that puts viewer and star in their own space together. Durbin was one of the few to do it honestly.)

After her first three movies, it was decided that all her films would be produced by the same man who had done the first ones, Joe Pasternak, whose filmmaking motto is said to have been “Never make an audience think.”* (All in all, they would do ten successful movies together.) Having found a hit maker in Durbin, the studio protected its interests and exploited her popularity, making as many good movies with her as quickly as it could. Naturally, it had to keep one eye on the clock—she was a teenage star who was *not* going to be a teenager much longer. By assigning the clever Joe Pasternak to handle all her movies, it was doing the best it possibly could for her—and for itself.

Pasternak had a popular touch and instinctively understood Durbin’s appeal. He cast her in light, comedic films that capitalized on her glorious voice and her abundant natural charm.† Pasternak’s

understanding of the Durbin mystique helped make her a star and keep her a star.* However, he was always generous, giving her all the credit. “No one makes a star, of course,” he said. “Not the producer, not the director, not the writer ... Deanna’s genius had to be unfolded, but it was hers alone, always was, and no one ‘discovered’ her or can take credit for her.”



Durbin posed in her own home with her real-life parents for their Christmas card.

Deanna Durbin was quickly put into two new films to be made and released in 1938: the aforementioned *Mad About Music*, co-starring her with Gail Patrick and Herbert Marshall, and *That Certain Age*, with Jackie Cooper. From 1938 on, Universal put her on a regular schedule of two films a year until 1942, when she was offscreen for the calendar year. Everywhere she went in public she drew huge crowds. She could no longer comfortably attend public school, so an on-set tutor was assigned to her. *Radio Guide* magazine listed her as one of the best network stars of 1937 (she had

continued singing on the radio), and her contract was rewritten. Her newly wealthy family moved from a cheap bungalow on Eighty-fifth Street to a beautiful \$50,000 mansion in the exclusive Los Feliz neighborhood. They acquired a grand piano, a swimming pool, two cars, and a staff. During production on *Mad About Music*, Durbin celebrated her sixteenth birthday, and the studio provided her with all the things movie stars always get on their birthdays: a big cake with her name on it and the chance to be photographed extensively cutting the cake while giving out interviews for the press. Durbin, according to newspapers and magazines, said officially: "I love being a movie star, and I love to sing. I'm very grateful to everyone who helped make it happen." This was the appropriate statement for fans and friends and employers: I'm happy. I'm humble. I'm grateful, and incidentally, I'm going to be obedient. It was what her studio wanted to hear.

Mad About Music was an unqualified hit, her third in a row. She was officially a star. Joe Pasternak had once again shaped Durbin's vehicle to reflect his particular combination of music, humor, and sentiment. It's a story designed to tug at the heartstrings. Deanna's been packed off to a boarding school in Switzerland by her glamorous mother (Gail Patrick), where she sings, feels lonely, and pumps up her bicycle tires. All ends well, with Durbin lying, maneuvering, and faking her way through the plot. The main thing was, of course, the music of the title. Durbin enjoyed making this film, finding friends in many who worked on the picture behind the scenes, among them a young assistant named Vaughn Paul.

As *That Certain Age* began shooting in early '38, Pasternak and Universal were acutely aware that in December Durbin would turn seventeen. And worse, she would then turn eighteen, nineteen, and onward toward a possible oblivion. Not being stupid, they realized that their only chance of preserving their box office bonanza was to get her public to accept the inevitable. For *That Certain Age*, they flirted with her oncoming maturity by creating a plot that allowed them to have it both ways. The advertising trailers openly announced that Durbin would have a boyfriend of her own age (played by the popular Jackie Cooper) as well as an "older man"

crush (the debonair Melvyn Douglas). She would, of course, still be the familiar, fresh young Deanna, and she'd sing. However, the movie accidentally gave fans more than the studio meant to show of what was ahead for little Deanna. It contained a scene in which her character fights with her parents over a dress they want her to wear at a big party. The dress is white, covered in ruffles and ribbons. Durbin refuses to wear it, complaining bitterly that it's too young for her, "a child's dress." (And actually, it is.) She defies her parents by secretly stealing one of her mom's formal gowns. The dress is long and black and strapless. She puts it on, piles her long hair up on top of her head, and floats downstairs in high heels. All of a sudden, Deanna Durbin looks not only *really* grown-up but also frighteningly sexy. What were the moviemakers thinking? Were they blind? Quickly enough, Durbin's "parents" take charge and stuff her back into the white ruffles, but not before everyone gets a look-see at something a little bit discomfiting. The plot *tells* viewers that Deanna Durbin looks silly dressed up way beyond her years, and that once she's returned to her white dress, she looks both appropriate and lovely. The truth is that the white dress is hideous, and Durbin looks luscious in the black. The scene backfires. All of a sudden, everyone can see that Durbin *is* going to grow up. And soon. She *is* going to wear black, slink downstairs, put her hair up, and go after—dare one say it?—some kind of sex life? Oh, no! But the cat is out of the bag. Universal didn't like it and neither did Durbin's fans, who wrote in and said they loved *That Certain Age*, loved Deanna, loved everything—but *not* the black dress or the "romance," however fake, with the older man.

Universal dodged a bullet, but they also saw the handwriting on the wall. They had jumped the gun on Deanna and learned that fans preferred not to be rushed. The studio immediately made a definite step-by-step plan for her growing-up process, figuring that if they handled the subject carefully, audiences *would* continue to love her. They put her and her image under their very tightest corporate control. And they were lucky: She aged gracefully, barely changing physically, and her primary appeal always lay in her vocal talent, which only got stronger. Furthermore, there was no problem of fans

having to lose their darling little star tot. Durbin didn't come to the screen as a *small* child. She was never a Shirley Temple. Even though Temple managed to look cute for more than ten years, her studio was always under pressure to keep her a child, because that was what the audience had first bought into. No one wanted *her* to grow up at all. She was more or less dropped offscreen during what is commonly called "the awkward age." ("The awkward age" is where Durbin began, but she was never awkward.) Everything Fox did to present Temple from her first big hit, *Stand Up and Cheer* in 1934, to what is really the end of her time as a child star, in 1940, was to dress her in the same way, keep her story lines about orphans, lost children, rich daddies, and helpful old codgers. In other words, stunt her growth and hang on for dear life to the box office bonanza that was Shirley Temple. Durbin's career could be handled differently. She didn't have to be frozen in a fixed narrative age. "See how she grows" could become one of her main selling points, so all the Universal machine marketing was geared to Durbin's aging process, but carefully and gradually.

Since Durbin had entered films so successfully in *Three Smart Girls*, Pasternak and Universal now felt that implementing the new Durbin "growing-up" plan could begin with a sequel. They could restore her to fans—start her back where she began and let her slowly move forward to a very young adulthood. The sequel to *Three Smart Girls* would be called—what else?—*Three Smart Girls Grow Up* (1939). It was exactly what fans wanted, and once again, Universal had a hit Deanna Durbin movie.

While Durbin was making *Three Smart Girls Grow Up*, she learned that she would be awarded an honorary Oscar at the 1938 Academy Awards ceremony on February 23, 1939. (Her *Smart Girls* sequel would go into general release toward the end of March of that year.) She would share the "juvenile" Oscar award with Mickey Rooney, and officially it would be defined as being "for their significant contribution in bringing to the screen the spirit and personification of youth, and as juvenile players setting a high standard of ability and achievement."* Rooney didn't show up for the ceremony, but Durbin did, giving a self-confident and appropriate speech that

made a good impression on everyone. “Three and a half years ago,” she said, “when I came into this business, I had one desire. That was to be as good as I could be. Tonight you have made me very, very happy. My aspirations had not reached such a peak. I am extremely grateful.”

Durbin was seventeen years old. (Rooney, born September 23, 1920, was eighteen.) Legally, she was no longer a child star. On the set of her first film, *Three Smart Girls*, her age qualified her as a child performer and the restrictions that applied had to be taken into consideration. Although she was allowed to be on the set all day, from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., the law required her to spend three of her hours in school sessions. Universal archival records indicate that her day included thirty minutes for lunch, two hours and ten minutes for makeup and wardrobe, and a thirty-minute respite at day’s end to prepare for leaving the studio (removing makeup, et cetera). Adding in her legally required school hours meant that she could be filmed only two hours and twenty minutes per day. On those terms, no one at her studio was interested in having her remain a child—it wasn’t profitable. Everyone, however, was interested in her receiving an Oscar for being one, and having the fans perceive her as one for as long as it was profitable.

The power of Durbin’s stardom is well illustrated by the article in the November 1939 issue of *Fortune* entitled simply “Deanna Durbin.” Under her name, a small headline stated, “One child who clicked among thousands who didn’t, Universal’s No. 1 drawing card will have earned \$1,600,000 before she is twenty-one. How?” The article points out that “a really successful child is not a success but a gold mine—for the studio as well as for the parents ... Such a career is still one of the great American fairy stories ... Most conspicuously, right now, it is happening to a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl named Deanna Durbin.” Durbin was actually seventeen and just about to turn eighteen on December 4, but facts were never an issue when it came to movie stars, even in *Fortune* magazine. *Fortune* says that her five movies to date had all grossed more than twice their production costs, and that her movies alone represented more than 17 percent of Universal’s entire gross. “It had long been a common Hollywood

assumption (not quite accurate, as will appear) that Deanna has been keeping that underprivileged studio from bankruptcy single-handed,” reports *Fortune*, adding, “In any case, for a maid so lately nubile, she has a tremendous commercial significance.” (This article says MGM let Durbin go by accident, her performance in *Every Sunday* having been deemed wonderful. There is no mention of any choice between Garland or Durbin, or any mention of Garland at all.)*

With Deanna turning eighteen on December 4, 1939, studio bosses felt it was time for a real “romance” on film for Deanna Durbin. Universal created a Cinderella story entitled *First Love*, thereby announcing to one and all to get ready for a more grown-up Deanna. All the movie ads blatantly promoted “Deanna’s first kiss,” and a great publicity hoo-hah was created out of the selection of the actor chosen to bestow it, the young and handsome Robert Stack, who would go on to a lifelong career in both film and television. Stack was Durbin’s on-screen Prince Charming, and their sweet “first kiss” was appropriately chaste by anyone’s standards. Deanna sang seven numbers, the production values were first rate, and her modest step toward maturity charmed everyone. Once again, Durbin’s movie was a hit, and Universal breathed a sigh of relief. Their marketing strategy was working. If they handled the issue carefully, Deanna Durbin would be allowed to become a grown-up (within limits) on-screen. What they didn’t realize was that “within limits” was going to irritate Edna Mae Durbin, and she was going to make her displeasure known. For the moment, however, everything was fine, and three weeks after her eighteenth birthday, Deanna Durbin began work on a movie to be called *It’s a Date* (1940), co-starring Walter Pidgeon and Kay Francis, which was so successful that it outperformed her previous two big hits at the box office. Durbin’s contract was renegotiated for a hefty \$300,000 per film, and she graduated from high school. It was 1940, and she was nineteen years old.

During her run of remarkable successes from 1936 to 1940, a four-year period in which she appeared in seven box office hits, Deanna Durbin was constantly in the fan magazines and

newspapers. She opened 1940 with her first costume picture, the rarely seen *Spring Parade*, one of those lighthearted Hungarian things. She finds romance (Bob Cummings), meets Emperor Franz Josef (Henry Stephenson), dances the czardas, clowns with Mischa Auer, sings six songs, and deals with a reluctant goat. She then went into her next movie, provocatively called *Nice Girl?*, a title designed to spice things up a bit. *Nice Girl?*, which was to be her first release of 1941, was planned as a transition movie, in which her character would be determined to shed the label of “nice girl.” (She ends up in a strange man’s pajamas, arriving home in the wee hours of the morning.) It would all be very innocent, of course, but it was provocative and once again showed how Universal cleverly shaped Durbin’s movies to be *about* her growing up. Since Durbin made movie after movie, she was never off the screen long enough to change all that much physically for her viewers. Audiences really *were* watching her grow up in a step-by-step process that was so continuous that it was never alienating.

Nice Girl? was in production on December 4, 1940, when Durbin celebrated her heavily publicized birthday. The event had become a tradition. She was “surprised” by a large party on the soundstage and presented with a “new song” to sing, “I’m Nineteen Now.” Plans for her next movie, to start immediately after *Nice Girl?*, were announced. It would be called *It Started With Eve* (1941), and she would co-star with the famous Charles Laughton. The studio saw no problems on the Durbin star horizon. However, the very next day Mr. and Mrs. Durbin announced the engagement of their nineteen-year-old daughter to that nice young man who had been working on her set back in 1938, Mr. Vaughn Austin Paul. The wedding date would be her parents’ own thirty-third wedding anniversary, April 18, 1941. It was Deanna Durbin’s first really grown-up step, and she took it on her own without the studio’s advice or prior approval. Marriage! *Dum-da-dum-dum*. The studio, less than thrilled, nevertheless revved up the publicity department. If they couldn’t stop it, they could at least use it.

The details of Durbin’s wedding to Vaughn Paul were fully reported in all the fanzines of the day. Deanna wed Paul at the

Wilshire Methodist Church where “Jeanette MacDonald had married Gene Raymond.” There were long stories about showers, parties, and, ominously, quarrels. “They quarrel now and then,” *Modern Screen* says cheerfully, adding, “Who doesn’t?” The main thing is this: “There has never been such a wedding.” (At least not since Jeanette MacDonald’s, Norma Shearer’s, Jean Harlow’s, or whoever’s.) Vera West designed her gown, and Deanna and Mrs. Durbin brought back the lace for the veil from a recent trip to France. (Just when they’d had time to go to France wasn’t made clear.) Deanna wore a lengthy, floating train, carried flowers with streamers, and shook hands with nine hundred guests. Judy Garland and her new musician husband, David Rose, were there, and so was Mickey Rooney. The other two of the “three smart girls” were bridesmaids, and a big reception was held in the Florentine Room of the Beverly Wilshire Hotel. Atop her giant wedding cake was a birdcage with a pair of lovebirds inside. Outside, and not invited, were thousands of fans, all screaming their heads off. The couple left on their honeymoon in a blaze of flashbulbs.

One month later, Deanna Durbin was back at work, filming *It Started With Eve*, which most fans think is her best movie and which became one of the year’s top ten box office draws. Directed with excellent pacing by Henry Koster, and once again produced by Joe Pasternak (in their final film together), the movie paired her with a worthy opponent in the scene-stealing department: the very wily Charles Laughton. The movie opened at Radio City Music Hall, the official exhibition endorsement of a film that everyone thought was going to make serious money. *It Started With Eve* presented the first really grown-up Durbin. She doesn’t “fix” things. (Laughton does.) She is out in the world, working for a living (as a hat-check girl), with no parents anywhere in sight (they are back in her hometown of “Shelbyville, Ohio”). At no time is she required to braid her hair in pigtails, put on little-girl outfits, or pretend to be anything other than a mature young lady. She has real love scenes, lovely clothes, and a chance to show herself as an excellent screwball comedienne. There’s one moment in which, fighting with her leading man, she’s asked to romp around a room in a juvenile manner, jumping over

furniture and careening around tables. However, she's wearing a sophisticated gown, hairdo, and makeup, and the "romp" has grown-up implications. The plot is clever. A rich old man, played to the rafters by Charles Laughton, lies on his deathbed. His son (Robert Cummings) races to his side, and the old man's last wish is to meet the woman that will become his daughter-in-law. Since this fiancée is out shopping with her harried mother, and since time's a-wastin', Cummings rushes out, spots Deanna, and hires her to impersonate his bride-to-be to give the old man peace. Instead, he gets a look at Durbin, perks up, and doesn't die. The rest of the movie is about sorting things out, with Durbin singing, Laughton hamming, and Cummings looking confused.

The pairing of Charles Laughton and Deanna Durbin is the Battle of the Charm Titans. Laughton was seldom cast with a co-star who could take a single moment away from him, and neither was Durbin. When these two scene stealers take to a nightclub floor to dance a wild conga, it's a true "I can do anything better than you can" moment of star acting, each one grabbing the focus back from the other one in a duel of audience champs. The great thing is that they seem to delight in the challenge. Finally, they both seem to be saying, I've got a co-star who can bounce back at me. *It Started With Eve* has that accidental magic that can lift a minor picture up: a harmony of great stars, great script and direction, superb production values, and a supporting cast in which not one false note is sounded. Fans ate it up. Everything seemed perfect.

And then it happened. Deanna's marriage was the first defiant step. The second was to begin openly fighting with her studio because she felt they were keeping her a child. Durbin went home and sat down ... and no studio threats could budge her. From *It Started With Eve*, released in October 1941, until *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday*, released in February 1943, no new Deanna Durbin movie appeared. Although it was announced that she was going to star in a film called *Forever Young*, to be directed by the celebrated Frenchman Jean Renoir (then in Hollywood), not a single Deanna Durbin movie was released in 1942.

Deanna Durbin and Universal Pictures faced an essential movie star problem: what the studio wanted versus what the star wanted. Durbin was that thing the studios most feared and hated in their “products”—a star with a brain in her head and a commonsense background. For her, it was about being allowed to be a grown-up woman and to appear as one on-screen. That meant being allowed to perform in more serious material and be recognized as a person who could make decisions regarding her career. Studios were experienced in handling movie stars who would sulk until they came to their senses, and the executives in charge made assumptions about Durbin’s feelings based on that kind of prior experience. They were used to stars who might present problems but who would let the money, the fame, and the lack of another potential career bring them home again. It didn’t occur to them that Durbin might be different. They always knew her movies would ultimately stop being profitable, at which point they would drop her, which would be her problem, not theirs. But in 1942, Deanna Durbin was a movie star with undeniable box office clout, and a year offscreen for her was money lost, especially since the public’s acceptance of her as an adult wasn’t a sure bet. Since Universal was a studio that did not own its own theatre chains, any movie star that could draw audiences was very important to them, more so than at the powerful studios that *did* have their own theatres. At first, Universal decided to wait her out. They used her hiatus to pump up her fan mag publicity, a way of concealing that there were no new Durbin movies in the works. The show went on.



Durbin saw herself as glamorous and mature, a woman who could do more than play feisty girls, but her studio wanted her to keep on pumping up her bicycle tires.



The studio worked hard to keep her in the public eye: They issued portraits from their files to keep her face out there, and she remained front and center in all its publicity handouts. She also remained a cover girl for *Photoplay*, *Modern Screen*, and all the others, since Universal had a backlog of photos. The volume 1, number 1 issue of *Star Album*, published in 1942, had Deanna Durbin on the cover. She also held pride of place in the month's stories, under the heading "America's Sweetheart." This article had one full-page photo and five other smaller ones. "She belongs to the public as no other star ever has," says the write-up, claiming the public has taken her to their hearts as though she were their own daughter, sister, or girlfriend, "whatever the case may be." She is praised for her talent, naturalness, and the fact that she has behaved like "a normal, well-bred young American girl and not like a rootin' tootin' movie star changing boyfriends and hair shades every other week."

"Deanna Durbin's Life Story" trumpets the cover of the February 1943 issue of *Modern Screen*, which also has her face on the cover. (She's twenty-one years old and already has a "life story." Not only

that, it's "Deanna Durbin's Life Story"—*book* length.) Durbin is everywhere in the magazine. Pages 26 through 33 and 97 through 102 are all entitled simply, "Deanna Durbin." There is a full-page black-and-white photo of her, and another "book-length" story of her life. Eighteen photos, including many family pictures, are printed. One of the photos is a wedding picture of Deanna and her groom. Durbin's "book-length" story is really only her original studio-invented bio updated to include her marriage and latest films. Readers apparently never got tired of hearing the same things repeated again and again.

Once Universal understood that Durbin was deadly serious about staying away, real negotiations began. Big promises were made, and Durbin agreed to return to work and was welcomed by everyone with great relief. In order to accommodate her complaints, it was agreed that her next film would indeed be directed by Jean Renoir, and it would be called *Forever Young* (a title that might have alerted Durbin to trouble ahead). It would, however, be produced by someone new, Felix Jackson, replacing Pasternak. The studio said Jackson would help create a new image for Deanna Durbin while still building on the old one that fans loved.

Forever Young was released as *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday*. It was another Durbin musical, and the director was the pedestrian Bruce Manning. What happened? For many years, no one really knew, but in 1986, the intrepid film historian William K. Everson published an explanation in *Films in Review*. Having read Renoir's newly published autobiography, which discussed the Durbin film and referred to Renoir's having done "several weeks" of shooting, Everson wrote to Durbin for an explanation. In one of her rare—and perhaps her only—responses to anyone asking about her former life, Durbin wrote a thoughtful letter back. She clarified the movie's purpose: "We all wanted to change the, by then, stereotyped image of the 'nice' young girl, the sugar-coated 'Miss Fixit,' the kind of story Jean Renoir qualified as 'trop mini.'" Durbin explained that Bruce Manning was named producer, and the working experience was a happy one. However, as shooting progressed, the script didn't seem to be working. Manning suggested adapting *The Taming of the*

Shrew to present-day Texas, with Durbin's "father" becoming a gas station owner. This idea did not work out. Durbin, who should know, made clear that Renoir shot two-thirds of the movie as it now exists.

Felix Jackson began management of Durbin's career with *The Amazing Mrs. Holliday*. Released in February 1943, the movie was weak, bolstered only by Durbin's still-intact charm. For her return to movies, the Durbin-Universal compromise is in effect. She is presented in both a childish way (pigtails, bobby sox, and oversized raincoat) and a grown-up, glamorous way (upswept hair, jewelry, and sparkling evening gowns, although much is made of how she can't really walk in her high heels). The plot was dubious, all about a missionary (Durbin) who rescues nine war orphans in China. For the first time in her career, there were serious rumbles from the critics. The fans, however, still loved her. ("Here's Deanna back—and about time!" crowed the ads. "The Great Durbin Drought is over!")

But what was happening? *It Started With Eve* seemed to have launched her into a more grown-up career, playing a lovely young woman, old enough to fall in love and marry and be on her own. She had been cleverly cast in a property that maintained her original persona but updated it into letting her deal with love, romance, and the need to make her own living. *Mrs. Holliday* was both a step back *and* a step down. Durbin's complaints about Universal grew. She began to speak openly about how she really felt. The fan magazines of 1943 began printing some of the truth about her situation.

At first, her remarks seemed cheerfully cranky—a "Well, everyone has to let me grow up, don't they?" kind of statement. And then they became frankly critical in a way seldom heard from movie stars. "You know how it is with parents? How they feel they still have a child when they haven't, until the child revolts and then something's done about it? They'd had me at the studio since I was a little girl, and I still seemed a little girl to them. You don't consult children. You decide what's good for them and do it. With grown-ups, you ask what they think, and if they think it's okay, *then* you do

it ... I just wanted to be consulted, talked to. What I really wanted, I guess, was for them to realize that I'd grown up." Then she began to do more than complain. That "well-bred American girl" who was no ordinary "rootin' tootin' movie star" but "happily married" sued her husband, Vaughn Paul, for divorce on the grounds of mental cruelty (the usual Hollywood issue). It was December 1943, and she was twenty-two years old. She told the press that she was "normally a very happy person" but that she had been in "a constant state of depression" which had been caused by Paul's "criticism of me and everything I did." Vaughn Paul enlisted in the navy and was not heard from on the subject. The divorce was granted. Within no time, Hedda Hopper was hired to write a treatise on the "Inside Story of Deanna Durbin's Divorce" in the January 1944 issue of *Motion Picture*. Durbin had, apparently, started doing a little rootin' and tootin', but Hedda stoutly does her job, recounting how Deanna had always been the ideal of American girlhood, *but ...* as Hedda flacks it, "Deanna's divorce is not shattering news to me. It is the most natural thing in the world ... Her marriage was doomed from the start." (Hedda Hopper as oracle.) Hedda tells us that Deanna forgot to follow the advice of her mother, just like *some of you fans out there* (so don't be so quick to judge and, above all, don't stop being her fans). She wisely casts Durbin as a "Cinderella," who just had to keep on with "her drudgery." "Work, work, work," says Hedda. Poor Deanna! Hopper describes how a special dressing room was presented to Deanna in a big public ceremony, and "it had been especially constructed for her, and it was a lovely thing." Although some people might think that indicates a life of privilege and pampering, Hopper is on the job to warn what it was really like: "Deanna went through the impressive ceremony graciously, then went back immediately into the dressing room. It might have been a prison, except that there were no bars."

Of course, for a young woman like Deanna Durbin it *was* a prison, albeit a luxurious one. She now faced one of her primary burdens as a movie star. The fans wanted her "prison" life for themselves, and if they couldn't have it, they wanted Deanna to have it on their behalf. She was their designated thriver, and if she

wasn't happy, well, it wasn't *their* fault, was it? Let her suffer. Besides, her suffering was interesting and united her even closer to them in their need for escape.

As for her studio, they had started making deals with other big names such as W. C. Fields, Marlene Dietrich, and Edgar Bergen. Instead of relying on a couple of Deanna Durbin movies to rake in the money, they started turning away from her to hire a solid list of performers they could use to make other A films every year. They *wanted* to make Durbin movies, but now she was what studios called "difficult." They dropped all pretense of her being *their* "little girl." Before he left her behind, even Pasternak himself, who loved her, called her a "cold cash property." Lest this seem heartless to her public, he reminded everyone of the facts of life about movie stardom: "We may seem inhuman," he said regarding how Durbin was treated, "but for a price like that [what she was paid] we can't be too gallant, either."

Since Deanna Durbin had always been Penelope Craig, her Penny from *Three Smart Girls*, Universal now had the brains to figure out a compromise that would work for them as well as for Durbin and her fans. They put her in a movie in which Penny was allowed to be grown up. Furthermore, they smartly connected her directly to the current issue of World War II defense plant efforts and the Rosie the Riveter working woman. *Hers to Hold* (1943) was the result. The credits warn that Deanna is not a child: "Miss Durbin's gowns by Adrian." And her co-star is not a boy. No Jackie Cooper or even a young Robert Stack. He's Joseph Cotten, who was not a kid but a suave and sophisticated "older" man. He has sex appeal and doesn't hide it.*

The movie starts with Penelope Craig giving blood at the American Red Cross blood bank. She enters to a flurry of activity—"Penelope Craig! A celebrity! Everyone knows her!" Durbin is given the kind of star entrance that was popular in Hollywood at the time. The audience naturally would be looking intently at the screen, waiting for their first glimpse of the Star Really Grown Up This Time. Everyone talks about her, says her character's name, anticipates her. When she enters, surrounded by reporters and

photographers and doctors and nurses, the audience is at first not allowed to actually see her. She's swept into a cubicle behind hospital screens where only her feet are visible. A flurry of photographers' bulbs go off. Then her unmistakable voice is heard and her legs go up on the bed. Audiences can hear her and see her feet in black high heels, but no Deanna! This kind of tantalizing photography and cutting and story building was perfect for Durbin, whose fan legions were so strong. Furthermore, there was the "Penny is now a grown-up—what is she going to look like?" issue for viewers. There's no real surprise. She looks like Deanna Durbin, which was the whole point of the star entrance.

Throughout the movie, the compromise between Durbin's desire to be a woman on-screen and Universal's need to have her be the same old Deanna is obvious. Charles Winninger, repeating his role as Durbin's father, nostalgically says, "Seems like only yesterday she was—that tall." Later in the film, he says, "You grew up too fast. It's the only way I have of keeping my little girl little" as he shows the "family" home movies. And naturally, the "home movies" are all footage from the original movie, *Three Smart Girls*, and other Durbin films. Fans can relive their first glimpse of Deanna, fresh-faced and sailing her boat. Several minutes of the running time of *Hers to Hold* is taken up with old footage. Deanna sails, pumps up her bicycle tires, hugs her father, has a pillow fight with her sisters, twirls for the camera in her first long dress, and sits proudly at her graduation. The star machine could solve its Durbin problem—resurrect the old one and resell her. (Universal knew how to sell its version of Deanna Durbin. No studio was ever smarter about any star, until it got dumb.)

The movie also does a good job of doing what Durbin herself wanted, by carrying little Penny forward into World War II America. The character had always been about democracy and female triumphs, so she goes to work in the aircraft factory and learns to rivet. Unlike what happens in some other movies that had movie stars or rich girls screw up in the "Oh-dear-I-broke-a-fingernail" school of women who have to *learn* to work, Penny gets it right away. (Durbin's democratic characters always would.) Furthermore,

she starts singing to entertain at lunch hour and makes friends with everyone. She fits in. When she and Cotten are at a dine-and-dance joint that workers frequent, she's the only one dressed in a long formal gown. Because it has an enormous hoopskirt, they can't find room on the crowded dance floor. Penny just goes behind a wall and jerks her gown off, coming out in her fancy little black slip as if it were a cocktail dress. Durbin's resourceful little girl is resourceful in a new way!

As usual, she's featured in several intense close-ups. Her lips are full and moist. Her voice is lower, huskier. And that nice little sparkling twinkle in her eye hints at something more than a bracing bicycle ride. But she's still Deanna: confident, sure, and clever at solving her problems. Cotten has told her he'll never get serious, but naturally, she gets her man. As he prepares to board his plane back to war in China, she confidently says, "I've got it all figured out. I'll build 'em. You fly 'em." It's the usual Durbin credo. The movie ends with a series of close-ups of her, first watching his plane take off, then singing at the factory, and then superimposed over flying B-17s. She is singing "Say a Prayer for the Boys Over There." All Deanna Durbin movies had their priorities straight.

Durbin appeared in one other 1943 release, Frank Borzage's sweet film *His Butler's Sister*. It was a charming comedy, with Durbin looking lovely and her co-stars, Pat O'Brien and Franchot Tone, supporting her in fine style. Durbin was not satisfied, however, and kept pushing the studio to let her appear to be older, sexier, more mature. Finally, her unhappiness could not be ignored; she was too big a star and too valuable a property. At the end of 1943, Universal gave in and announced that from now on, Deanna Durbin's movies would change direction and audiences would see her as a dramatic actress rather than a musical comedy star. Durbin had triumphed over the machine and was going to challenge the typecasting that had been hung on her since her first movie. The announcement was made by Felix Jackson, who firmly stated that Durbin's total change of pace would begin with her playing in a film noir inexplicably named *Christmas Holiday* (1944). (As if that weren't a big enough error, it co-starred her with newcomer Gene Kelly. Although Kelly

had not yet fully established himself as the musical box office star he would become, he was still associated with musicals through his Broadway success *Pal Joey* and his successful co-starring vehicle with Judy Garland, *For Me and My Gal*, in 1942.*) Naturally, audiences assumed that a movie co-starring Deanna Durbin and Gene Kelly and called *Christmas Holiday* would be a lighthearted musical. (People still make this mistake.) The grim little story has Kelly playing a murderer and Durbin his put-upon wife who, it is hinted, is practically a prostitute. Ah, the lapses of sanity amid the coldhearted planning of the studio system. In her role as “nightclub hostess,” Durbin is first seen dragging herself out into the footlights of a seedy dive to warble the bad news: “Spring will be a little late this year.” Audiences barely knew what to do with themselves.

Seen today, *Christmas Holiday* isn’t all *that* strange. Gene Kelly’s character is, for most of the film, Gene Kelly’s character—a charming seducer with a hard edge, his traditional Pal Joey. He’s creating a likable heel, familiar Kelly territory. He’s overfriendly, oversolicitous, taking his Irish charm just a shade too far, so that it seems ominous, even dangerous. In fact, both Kelly and Durbin are really quite good in this film, but over the years, the idea that they were miscast has doomed *Christmas Holiday*. They are miscast only in terms of audience expectations, not in terms of their abilities. (Playing a cynical newspaperman, Richard Whorf assesses their relationship: “Bad boy meets good girl. Damage estimated at \$10,000.” It was the general critical opinion.)

Christmas Holiday was the only time Durbin was allowed to act a mature role with pain and depth connected to it. When Kelly commits murder, his creepy mother (played by Gale Sondergaard) blames it all on the Durbin character. Awash in guilt feelings, Deanna degrades herself by accepting “work” in a “nightclub” that is obviously selling female companionship. Her entrance is once again held back. The plot has been under way for a good ten minutes before she appears, and the setting for her entrance must have been genuinely shocking to her fans at the time. It’s a dark and stormy night—hard rain, wet streets, expressionistic lighting—outside a run-down old mansion that is an obvious brothel. There’s

a madam (Gladys George), and two women are dancing together. Couples are going upstairs. “Girls” are sitting at tables, and Durbin is dressed in low-cut black satin, wearing heavy makeup. She’s tired, depressed, and down on her luck. When she sings, she has no zing, no bounce. Her radiant smile is gone. Deanna Durbin is too tired to twinkle.



Durbin’s one chance for an acting challenge came in *Christmas Holiday*, with Richard Whorf and Gene Kelly, but fans didn’t like her in dark shadows, heavy lipstick, low-cut necklines, and murky melodrama.

As the plot unfolds, Durbin is given the chance to break down and cry, to express regret, and to really suffer. If you didn’t know who Deanna Durbin was, you would accept her performance on its own terms—and she’s good. She was never afraid to show emotion as an actress. But the ghost of “Deanna Durbin” hovers over her character. If you take away the noirish shadows, narrated flashbacks, and wipe off all her makeup, you could find the usual

Durbin in her “girl from Vermont” who falls in love with the wrong guy. What’s missing is the fix-it quality and the radiance. And yet there’s no finer Deanna Durbin screen moment than when she embraces Kelly and lovingly sings the Irving Berlin hit song “Always.” The problem was simple: Her studio and her fans didn’t want to see her feeling blue and looking troubled. It wasn’t that she couldn’t do it, it’s that no one wanted her to.

Durbin received some favorable reviews, and she herself was said to believe that *Christmas Holiday* was her best movie. However, fans moved fast to write in and complain, making it clear: Give us back our Deanna. And right now. Universal moved equally fast to comply.

The failure of *Christmas Holiday* drove Durbin back to musicals. She next made her first color film, *Can’t Help Singing*, a fluffy little “wagons west” story about yet another feisty and independent, parent-defying young woman. The film has a marvelous Jerome Kern score (with lyrics by E. Y. Harburg), and no fewer than three hit songs emerged from it: the title song, the bouncy “Californ-i-ay,” and the lyrically beautiful love song “More and More.” By 1941, most leading ladies were being presented to the public in color, and certainly musical stars were appearing almost exclusively in Technicolor movies. Yet Durbin had been a workhorse saddled to cheaper black and white to bring the maximum profits to Universal. As a sop to her return to type, Universal appeased her by placing her front and center in glorious color and lavish costumes designed by Walter Plunkett.* In color, her hair has been turned into a reddish gold that enhances her milky complexion. She’s decked out in a series of gowns in striking colors: a giant green bow on a hat, a red-and-gray plaid coat trimmed in gray fox with matching muff, and an all-lavender ensemble. Whatever she wears, she has matching gloves, hat, and flowers or ribbons for her hair. She looks good in a lighthearted and swiftly moving entertainment piece. But it’s still the old Deanna Durbin character—a twisty little piece of baggage, an adorable con artist who takes things into her own hands and gets her own way from all the grown-ups, including her parents. (Let it be said once and for all: The little girl actresses who were big,

from Pickford through Temple to Durbin and on to today's Hilary Duff, were never anything but a living hell for men. They took charge, and how!)

One scene illustrates why Durbin's frustration with Universal's inability to accept her as a woman was valid. When she sings "More and More" to her leading man, the forgettable Robert Paige, they are alone at night in the open spaces, traveling overland to rejoin their wagon train. (Where were the censors on this one? Maybe because it was Deanna Durbin, they figured no one would believe she'd do anything inappropriate at night.) There's an undeniably sexy quality to her performance. She leans seductively toward Paige, singing with a deeply controlled but unmistakable warmth that could be called *heat*. It's not just a number in the movie, it's really a *love* song. She sings it *to* him, with an intimacy that most romantic numbers don't have. There was always something lush about Deanna Durbin, something soft and sensuous under her sparkle and bounce; she was a softly curved and sexy woman. She married three times before she was thirty years old, and she wanted to put this element of herself on the screen. From time to time, she succeeded far more than she may have thought she did.

Can't Help Singing was a hit. After its successful release in 1945, Durbin and Felix Jackson (who was considerably older than she) eloped and were married quietly in Las Vegas. (Durbin's career had only three years left to run, and that would be just about the lifetime of her marriage.) Her next film was one of her best as an adult singing comedienne. *Lady on a Train* (1945) was directed by Charles David, the man who would become her next and last husband. She has clearly been "made over." Her hair is long and blond, her makeup is mature, and her lips look sensuous. Durbin has been "styled" and has her own version of the great female star's personally designed wardrobe. The only problem is that these clothes are really hideous. In one scene she wears a coat that had to have been made out of a pinto pony—and it's trimmed with studded cuffs. With it she has a runaway hat with a gigantic feather jammed in it.* (Wearing this outfit, she's chased by angry dogs. I rest my case.)

There's a schizophrenic quality to the costuming that reflects the ongoing fight between Durbin and her studio. In an early scene, she wears her hair in little pigtails and sloshes into a crowded movie theatre in an oversized raincoat, causing a big ruckus—ever the determined Miss Fix-It, bent on getting her way. Soon after, she appears in a glamorous black faille suit with matching hat and muff, her hair twisted into two elaborate chignons. Since we've just seen her in the raincoat and pigtails, the faille and the chignons make her look as if she's our Deanna just playing dress-up in her mom's clothes. *Lady on a Train* is lots of fun, but right on the screen it makes clear the conflict over Deanna Durbin and her image. On the one hand, there's the studio's obvious attempt to present the story as if our Deanna were still perking along, solving a murder with the same spunk and energy she put to getting work for her dad's orchestra. On the other, audiences can see her in black, stepping out under a shadowy nightclub spotlight, singing "Gimme a Little Kiss, Will Ya, Huh?" in a drop-dead sexy manner. Even in a single scene, the conflict can show up. Deanna's offscreen daddy out in San Francisco can't sleep until she sings to him, so she uncorks a lyrical "Silent Night." (It's really still 1937, fans, and all's right with Deanna's world.) But the number is shot like a typical Hollywood glamour moment worthy of a Turner or a Hayworth. Durbin is radiantly lit in close-up, her long blond hair spread out over a satin pillow. As she literally coos, "Silent night, holy night," a series of close-ups show her right side up, upside down, from overhead, from under her chin, from dead on. Suddenly it's 1945, folks, and here's your latest pinup babe! Universal Studios and Deanna Durbin were on a collision course.

Durbin's next film, *Because of Him*, released in 1946, would be more of the same. It reteamed her with Charles Laughton; Franchot Tone was her romantic lead. Her clothes were designed by Travis Banton, and her cameraman was the great Hal Mohr. One credit tells us that the "Musical Director of Miss Durbin" is Edgar Fairchild. Not only does she have her own personal musical director, but she is "Miss Durbin," no less. (The producer, of course, is her

husband, Felix Jackson.) She was being taken care of in the way she wanted to be taken care of, but also in the way Universal wanted.

Because of Him shows how the audience just wanted Durbin and didn't care about logic. Her character wants to be an actress, not a singer. She becomes a Broadway actress in a straight play, and the fact she's a great singer plays no role in this success. Well, why not? We're in a Deanna Durbin movie, and Deanna Durbin is a singer. Durbin is the definer of her own movie universe—no further explanations are needed. In the beginning of *Because of Him*, she sings for no reason, allegedly singing along to a recording she has made of herself. She is dreamy, radiant. Her close-ups invite intimacy, and the structure of her movies does the same. Viewers watch her primp, check out her appearance in a mirror, decide which pin to wear on her suit, and so on. She seems to be singing for herself alone, separate from her filmed universe, and thus singing directly to the audience. Deanna Durbin movies began to be only about her and her audience. Both star and studio no longer pretended they were to be anything more than vehicles for her singing and her popularity.

While making *Because of Him*, Durbin and Jackson announced that they were expecting a baby in March 1946. This child, her first, was a daughter born in February and named Jessica.* Sadly, the marriage was already in serious trouble, and the couple would announce their separation within the year. After the birth of her daughter, Durbin would make only four more movies. The first, and the last to be produced by Felix Jackson, was a musical remake of a Margaret Sullavan hit, *The Good Fairy* (1935). The original script had been written by the talented Preston Sturges and directed by William Wyler. The remake was updated to make Durbin a movie usher named Louise Ginglebusher and to give her four lovely songs. The new title was *I'll Be Yours* (1947), and Durbin, now a mother, played her part of the lovable orphan with great charm. It was her last good movie. The final three films of her career were *Something in the Wind* (a title just asking for critical jokes), which cast her as a female disk jockey who gets kidnapped; *Up in Central Park*, her second period piece based on a stage musical about Boss Tweed; and

her very last movie, *For the Love of Mary* (1948), which had been shot before *Up in Central Park. Mary*, in which she plays a White House telephone operator, had been shelved, but was finally released in late 1948.

Durbin was under contract to Universal until the end of 1949, but she didn't make a single film that year (although she collected her salary). Her divorce from Jackson was finalized during this time on the grounds that he had "deserted her two years before." Durbin said, "He left me and went to New York. He never came back and I have never seen him again." Taking her little daughter with her (she was granted custody), she went to France, removing herself from the spotlight forever. Her only words regarding her departure were these: "Take a look at my last four films and you'll appreciate that the stories ... were mediocre—near impossible. Whenever I complained or asked for story or director approval, the studio refused. I was the highest-paid star in the poorest material." In December 1950, she married Charles David, the man who had directed her in *Lady on a Train*, and in July 1951, they had a son named Peter. And that is really the last anyone can say about Deanna Durbin. Edna Mae apparently lived on and lived on happily, but Deanna Durbin was finished.

BY THE TIME DURBIN LEFT, Universal was not all that surprised. Furthermore, they had prepared themselves for losing her. She was star trouble, and they knew it. As early as the end of the 1930s, Universal was already trying to create other little Deanna Durbins—just in case—while over at MGM, they, too, were trying to recoup their losses from not having kept her under contract. Imitation Durbins were almost a cottage industry. Not only was she a product at Universal, she was *the* product. Naturally, they had to have a potential replacement under contract, and they had not one, but two: first, Gloria Jean; then, Susanna Foster.

It's the ultimate business irony—and perhaps another of the reasons people outside of Hollywood think the place is insane—that,

after having spent a fortune to create a unique personality that they and only they owned, a studio would immediately set out to duplicate it. Once movie stars' types were fully established, they could receive the ultimate tribute to their importance: the creation of a "look-alike" or potential replacement who could become a threat in case the star became difficult to work with.* All successful movie stars faced this "duplicator" issue. Even Shirley Temple was threatened by Fox's other very popular child star, Jane Withers. And Paramount developed a brunette would-be Temple, Carolyn Lee, who could neither sing nor dance. Rival studios always would try to create their own version of a successful actor or actress. This was true proof of stardom. Margaret O'Brien said, "MGM had a look-alike for every star ... if you were a star, they would hold it over you and threaten to use the look-alike ... even though they never would." For instance, it's strange to read articles today about the unique qualities of Lauren Bacall. She's lasted long enough and at a high enough level in movies, theatre, and television not to have to justify herself. She has *become* an original, eliminating the competition. But when audiences first saw her, they talked about Veronica Lake. Like Lake, Bacall was skinny, seductive, and had long flowing hair. Lake was the original, a sexy little girl with blond hair falling over one eye and a low, husky voice. After Lake, and then Bacall, came Lizabeth Scott, a blonde (like Lake) with a smoky voice and a sultry manner, and Nancy Guild, groomed for stardom by an ad campaign that screamed Guild "rhymes with *wild!*"† Bacall is a case where the duplication surpassed the original.

Dane Clark was a look-alike John Garfield.‡ Patric Knowles was a look-alike Errol Flynn. James Craig, a Clark Gable, and Cheryl Walker, a Lana Turner. Interestingly, if Warners had wanted a look-alike Joan Blondell, they had one ready made in her own sister, Gloria. Unfortunately for her career, Gloria was *too* much of a look-alike. In a small role as Errol Flynn's secretary in *Four's a Crowd*, it's distracting. When she enters the room, she disrupts the flow of the story. Is this *Joan* Blondell? In the meantime, the interaction

between Flynn and Rosalind Russell gets lost. Warner Bros. understood the problem. Gloria Blondell couldn't be a star.

Durbin's situation in facing the competition from look-alikes was not unique. It was just *especially* delineated and highly developed. The business made more imitation Durbins than anyone else. The first "Deanna," Gloria Jean Schoonover, was about five years younger than Durbin. (Durbin was born in 1921 and Schoonover in 1927.) She was said to have been onstage in local theatres when she was only three years old, and she had a radio program in Scranton, Pennsylvania, in 1932. By 1937, she was studying opera in New York and was brought to the attention of Joe Pasternak, who was only then beginning to shape Durbin's career. In an interview in *Films in Review* in 1973, Gloria Jean (which became her film name) proclaimed Deanna Durbin her idol, and said, "I was publicized as Deanna's protégée, and, of course, there was an age difference. Although we were both at the same studio I can't say I really knew her, which was very disappointing to me."

Gloria Jean signed a seven-year contract with Universal and, like Durbin, made her first picture as a star, receiving billing over everyone and surrounded by an excellent cast: Beulah Bondi, Billy Gilbert, Robert Cummings, C. Aubrey Smith. The movie, released in 1939, was called *The Under-Pup*, and it was in every way a Deanna Durbin vehicle. But had Durbin not been a star, Gloria Jean would never have existed. She wasn't good enough, although she could sing and was sweet-looking (actually, she looks amazingly like Deanna Durbin). Today, none of Gloria Jean's sixteen Universal films is well known, with the notable exception of *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* (1941), which is revived because of W. C. Fields. The proof of Gloria Jean's purpose is clear from the start. In her very first moment in the bizarre comedy (penned by Fields under the name of Otis Criblecoblis), she is, apropos of nothing, photographed pumping up her bicycle tire, a definite joke on Deanna Durbin. It's hard to build a career of your own as a cartoon version of a bona fide movie star. In 1946, at the age of nineteen, Gloria Jean faced the end of her seven-year contract. By 1961, she was a hostess at a Tahitian restaurant in Encino.

Gloria Jean was never able to establish herself because she *was* an imitation Deanna Durbin. She had no territory of her own to claim, so when Durbin left films, what was the point of having a referential rival?

Someone who fared a little bit better, for at least a moment of fame, was Universal's other "Durbin," whose fans are still loyal today, Susanna Foster. Suzanne DeLee Flanders Larson was a Chicago-born girl who loved Jeanette MacDonald, claiming to have seen her in *Naughty Marietta* (1935) sixty-eight times before she stopped counting. She had a lovely voice and a passion to sing, and like Durbin and Gloria Jean before her, found the chance to warble on radio while still a kid. When a midwestern critic sent a recording of her to MGM, she was signed to a contract without the studio actually having set eyes on her. She was, by her own description, a pretty bizarre sight when Ida Koverman, Louis B. Mayer's assistant, came to the train to fetch her. "I was 5'9" tall, weight 69 pounds, wore a tailored suit, a little derby hat, a blouse from the dime store, high heels, and carried a Pomeranian Spitz dog." She was also, as of that day in February 1937, exactly twelve years old, having been born in December 1924. She met her idol, Miss MacDonald, and all the other MGM stars, and was given a screen test in which she played a scene from *Anne of Green Gables* (1934). Promptly, she was offered the leading role in the movie version of Enid Bagnold's *National Velvet*. (The film wasn't made until 1944, at which time it made a star of a beautiful little girl who couldn't sing and didn't need to—Elizabeth Taylor.) Susanna said no. Her family, who apparently let the kid run things, backed her up. Why did she say no? Because she wasn't scheduled to sing in the movie. Probably shocked out of their minds, the heads of MGM dropped her in February 1938. (Having had plenty of experience with young men and women and their families, they undoubtedly smelled the trouble that, in fact, Susanna Foster would later represent.)

Foster persevered and, because of her singing talent, was signed by Paramount for *The Great Victor Herbert* (1939). The stars were Allan Jones and Mary Martin, who were both kind to her, and her big number, "Kiss Me Again," was a triumph. Publicized as the girl

who could “hit B-flat above high C,” Foster made two more films at Paramount, *There’s Magic in Music* (1941) and *Glamour Boy* (1941), but she also developed a reputation for being difficult, impatient, and dangerously outspoken. Since stars needed to be grateful, manageable, and obedient, and she was none of the above, she sat around the studio for nearly a year doing nothing. Barely seventeen years old and with only three films in the can, she demanded to be released from her contract in 1942 and applied to work at Lockheed Aircraft. Instead, she signed with Universal, who had their own problems. When Durbin rejected the leading lady role in their planned remake of *Phantom of the Opera* (1943), Susanna Foster was given the part.

Phantom of the Opera was shot in three-strip Technicolor and cost \$1.5 million, a huge sum in those days. Foster played the female lead, with Claude Rains as the Phantom and Nelson Eddy as her romantic co-star. It was an enormous hit and had excellent production values in all departments, ultimately winning Oscars for color cinematography and set design. Susanna Foster was at the top of the heap. After making a *Phantom* rip-off, *The Climax*, in 1944, and doing some radio, she made three more movies and then, startling everyone, went on hiatus in 1945. “I want to do what I want to do,” she said. “And that has nothing to do with show business.” Nothing really happened for her ever again. In 1948, she rejected Universal-International’s offers to star first in *One Touch of Venus*, then *The Countess of Monte Cristo* (1948). “I sold my mink coat,” she said, “and came back East with \$1,500 to my name ... I was terribly disillusioned with the movie business.”

Foster didn’t follow orders, and thus didn’t fit any studio’s idea of potential “product.” “There’s always been talk that the studio signed me as a rival to Deanna,” she said in an interview in February 1983 in *Films in Review*, “but I don’t think Universal was thinking that far ahead when they signed me for *Phantom*.” Rumors hinted that Deanna herself killed Foster’s progress, using her influence with studio heads. “If she did, it’s news to me,” said Foster.

The only really successful “Deanna Durbin” model was Jane Powell, who began her career at Universal about the time that Deanna’s fame was winding down. Like her predecessors, she found early success on radio and made her movie debut in her tender years, at the age of fourteen, in *Song of the Open Road* (1944), in which she played a teenaged girl named Jane Powell. She was then given the name professionally without her consent, being informed on the telephone that she had been renamed. (She was born Suzanne Burce.) Unlike Foster, she acquiesced about such things. (“People have asked if being named over the phone was traumatic, but I’d never thought about it. I guess it could be, if you let it.”)

In fact, that kind of positive attitude seems to have kept Powell afloat. She was a hard worker, a genuine talent, and she had the good fortune to leave Universal to sign with MGM, who now had Joe Pasternak under contract. In Powell, MGM finally found its own Deanna Durbin—Baryshnikov to Durbin’s Nureyev. Like Durbin, Powell was showcased in her movies, which were vehicles designed specifically for her. Pasternak produced the first five of Powell’s MGM pictures, and later four more. The *New York Times* nailed down her pedigree: “Miss Powell doesn’t have as yet the easy charm Deanna Durbin exhibited, but given a little more time under the expert tutelage of Mr. Pasternak there is no reason why she, too, shouldn’t become the movies’ singing sweetheart.” No reason at all. In fact, Powell remade the Deanna Durbin feature *It’s a Date* as *Nancy Goes to Rio* in 1950, and the *Times* said, “MGM is trying to route [Jane Powell] in the footsteps of the young Deanna Durbin.” As the studio system collapsed and her style of musicals lost favor with the public, Powell sensibly remarked, “I didn’t quit movies. They quit me.” Jane Powell was too good to be nothing more than a Durbin rip-off, and her career lasted longer than anyone else’s in the singing-girl-who-grows-up category. She’s still beautiful and youthful today, a true star who made her own mark in the movies. She kept working—did lecture tours, television, exercise tapes for the arthritic, summer stock, Broadway, and wrote a book. In *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*, a book written by her husband, former child star Dickie Moore, Powell made a definitive movie star

statement: “I did what I was told. I spent my life trying not to disappoint anybody.”

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NO MATTER HOW MANY imitators Hollywood might develop, there was only one Deanna Durbin, and there will never be another one. People today don’t realize how fresh she was, how unique. When they hear about her, they assume she was some sort of “goody-goody” and inevitably want to avoid her. Described that way, she sounds awful. But she wasn’t.

Deanna Durbin’s movies are about innocence and sweetness. They’re from a different time and a different place. Outside the movie house, there was Depression, poverty, war, death, and loss. Audiences then were willing to pretend, to enter into a game of escape. No one really thought that the world was like a Deanna Durbin movie, they just wanted to pretend it was for about an hour and a half.

The concept of a Deanna Durbin—a lovely teenage role model who makes a big success—seems dated. And yet the beat goes on. Today her type is bigger than ever, as merchants have clearly identified the female teenage market as a gigantic one. “Deannas” don’t sell the same brand of innocence, but they sell. And sell. Now they live on TV. The venue is different, and they dress like little tarts, but they’re still kids working the teenage market. The most successful and mainstream representatives are the Olsen twins, Mary-Kate and Ashley, who starred for years on the sitcom *Full House*. They now license their image to video games and market their “lifestyle brand,” which sells clothing, shoes, perfume, and other such items through Wal-Mart. Other new Durbins have a home on the Disney Channel: Raven (*That’s So Raven*), Hilary Duff (*Lizzie McGuire*), and the animated heroines Kim Possible (voice-acted by Christy Carlson Romano) and Penny Proud (voice-acted by Kyla Pratt). These neo-Durbins of Disney are an interesting lot. They’re diverse—black, white, live-action, animated, clairvoyant, klutzy, even superpowered—but they’re uniform, all of them being

positive, energetic girls who live the middle-class American teenager's life. Hilary Duff's Lizzie McGuire is probably the best known of the bunch, but the Disney Channel has promoted Raven heavily. She made a film for the channel, *The Cheetah Girls*, about three high school friends who form a singing group. A single from the movie played frequently on the channel, in which the girls sing about the legends of Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella, but in this song, there's a twist: The three girls aren't buying into the fantasy! "I don't want to be like Cinderella," the three girls sing. "I can slay my own dragons, I can dream my own dreams. I'm my own knight in shining armor. I'm my own superhero." It's not all that hard to picture Deanna Durbin singing these words.

Deanna Durbin's screen character was simple and direct, with a lemony zest and a sly self-humor. Like Mary Pickford before her, she has been totally misrepresented. In her movies, she stopped at nothing to get what she wanted. She's female power unleashed, seldom naïve, and almost always a manipulator—a role born in her first movie, *Three Smart Girls*. Except for *Christmas Holiday*, her films kept to the image she had successfully defined as a child: spirited, determined, and conniving. All her characters tended to have similar "problems" to solve. She undertakes countless pretenses to further her own wishes—pretending someone is her dad who isn't, pretending to be someone's fiancée when she isn't, pretending to be a new maid when she isn't, pretending to be someone's widow when she isn't, et cetera. But whatever she does, it's light and easy. And when things start to drag, she sings. Her movies usually ended with her singing, all plotlines abandoned and all side characters left out of the frame. (Who were they, anyway?) Audiences liked it that way, and female teenagers adored her. She was their role model. And they remained loyal to her long after her career was over.



The woman who was once Deanna Durbin, out for a stroll in her anonymous French world.

Why did audiences embrace Durbin? She's that American icon—the problem solver, the little underdog winner, the individual whose determination changes things to the way she wants them to be. Sometimes she's poor, but then she gets successful or richer. Sometimes she's rich, but she's always down-to-earth, acting as if her bedroom weren't bigger than Madison Square Garden and as if every teenager wore floor-length white ermine. For females, she was that special movie example—a member of their sex whom the entire world revolved around, the center of the filmed universe.

Deanna Durbin might not have been a great actress, but she wasn't a bad one either, and she *was* a great personality. There was an honest quality about her, and audiences felt it. Whatever motivated her to leave the business—the desire to be real and have a life that made sense—was the truth that audiences felt in her on-screen presence. Durbin connected right *to* audiences. She seemed to be one of them. The amazing thing about her was that it turned out to be true. She came down off the screen and proved it by rejoining them. Her defection wasn't a ploy and was never rescinded.

Why *did* Deanna Durbin retire? Watching her obvious joy in her singing, in her music, and even her delight in the roles she plays, one can only wonder how it is for her now. All reports are that she is happy in her life, and that she never regretted walking away from Hollywood. (Judy Garland said she had once run into Durbin in Paris, and that she was obviously happy. Garland, on the other hand, had confessed her own woes to her former colleague. Laughing, Garland said Durbin told her, “Why don’t you get out of that business, you dumbbell?”) But what a talent Durbin had. What a voice! Does she hum a few bars while she bakes, out there in her French farmhouse? Does she ever think about the past? Does she say “I could have been a contender if they had let me play Hedda Gabler”? Deanna Durbin, that most open and radiant of movie stars, remains more enigmatic than Garbo. She retired and led a normal life, the one thing that seems to have eluded almost every other movie star. She’s the winner, and still champ.

JEAN ARTHUR



Jean Arthur

Jean Arthur became a movie star twice. It didn't make her happy either time. She first reached the top during the silent era, mostly in low-budget westerns, but was nevertheless a genuine leading lady. After leaving Hollywood "for good" in 1931, she returned and became a star a second time. Film history has chosen to ignore Arthur's silent film career and embrace the idea that she fought the system all her life, forging an independent stardom throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s, refusing to cooperate with the system along the way. The truth is that Jean Arthur was always a studio contract player, and proof of her cooperation with the star machine—however unfulfilling it was for her or how unwilling she was to do it—exists in countless published interviews, magazine covers, fashion portraits, radio show appearances, and posed stills. (My favorite is a shot for the 1941 movie *The Devil and Miss Jones*. There she is, all smiles, bare back, and shoulders, looking sexy in a one-piece bathing suit.)

It was a weird fate that moved the shy and insecure Jean Arthur into the most demanding of publicity arenas: movie stardom. It seems inexplicable, but although Arthur *was* shy and insecure, she was also ambitious and driven. She was able to resolve her schizoid dilemma—the need for privacy versus the desire to act—when she located a place of safety that allowed her to deal with both: the performance privacy of a movie set. By her own admission, she was happy while filming. "I hardly know how to explain it myself," she said, "but when I am on the set, I am an entirely different person. I'm not afraid of anybody or anything. I'm absolutely self-possessed and at ease ... And yet, if I were to meet any one of the very same people at a cocktail party half an hour later I would be tongue-tied." Loving her work, Arthur succeeded at it. However she suffered, she learned to cooperate with the star machine. She hated it, but she did it. She balanced her worlds. And so it was that the story of Jean

Arthur, movie star, became the story of a woman who quit, came back, quit again, came back again, and along the way constantly threatened to quit for good.* In the end, she stayed the course, never fully disappearing until she became too old to be a romantic leading lady. When Jean Arthur finally *did* leave the screen permanently, it was nearly thirty years after she had made her first appearance on it.

After her success was established, Jean Arthur made a mantra out of her complaints, constantly griping about having to give interviews and pose for stills, bemoaning her fate as a movie star. How could the star machine possibly promote someone like that? Ironically, promoting Jean Arthur was a piece of cake. The machine just sold her misery. Columbia Pictures created a ruthlessly clever campaign in which they made no attempt to hide Arthur's unhappiness, giving full press coverage to everything negative she had to say. Their approach was "Let her gripe. We can use it." They simply asked fans to sympathize with the poor unhappy dear. As a sidebar, they reminded everyone that it was the generous studio itself that had changed her status from a minor actress with an inferiority complex to a glamorous—and wealthy—motion picture star. ("See photos. We know how to turn reluctance and lack of cooperation into something *fine*.") Not only fine, in Arthur's case, but spunky, charming, and, of course, downright *American*. They had spun gold out of straw. What's more, they could do the same thing for anyone (thus giving rise to hope in kitchens and shops all over America).

Fan magazines and press clippings validate how Columbia Pictures (Arthur's home studio during her greatest days in the 1930s) promoted her from 1934 onward as someone quite possibly off her rocker but adorable and worthy of fan support: "Jean Arthur Needs Your Help," "The Strange Case of Jean Arthur," "The Private World of Jean Arthur," "Hollywood's Problem Child," and "Is Jean Arthur Really Unhappy?" These alternated with pleas for understanding: "Leave the Lady Be!" and "Give Her a Break!"* Arthur, needless to say, was required to pose for all the photos that accompanied those stories.

The people who worked with Arthur found her to be reliable and professional. † She took her career seriously, and when her nervousness interfered with her work, it was always because she was trying to do a better job, give a better performance. Her co-workers sympathized, and the worst they had to say of her was she was a little “eccentric” or “odd.” The best word the studio could find to say about her was the vague “independent.” Whenever the Hollywood film business called someone “independent,” it meant “publicity trouble.” Errol Flynn was “independent” and so was W. C. Fields. Carole Landis, a beautiful blond starlet who ended up committing suicide, was “independent.” Unlike Flynn, Fields, and Landis, Jean Arthur was not seen constantly in nightclubs, nor was she an alcoholic or a playgirl. Early on in her career, however, there had been a bizarre biographical event that labeled her as a possible candidate for “independence.” She got married for twenty-four hours.

His name was Julian Ancker, and she wed him in the latter part of 1928. When the marriage was annulled after a single day, there was a great deal of negative press coverage. Her parent studio at the time, Paramount, came up with various explanations. The first one released to the public was that after her marriage, Jean Arthur discovered she had a clause in her contract that forbade her to wed, and she chose career over love. Arthur herself publicly denied this, making the statement that she would marry any man she loved and wouldn't mind losing her career over it. She added, “I made a mistake and I realized it. I thought it best to correct it.” (One fan article tried to turn the marriage into a women's film weepie, claiming that Ancker had died tragically on their wedding day.) When Arthur left Hollywood in 1931, her marital “incident” was forgotten, and when she returned to a larger fame in the mid-1930s, her official Columbia Pictures studio bio eradicated it. Much later, near the end of her life, Arthur offered her only explanation. “Julian looked a bit like Abraham Lincoln and that's probably why I fell in love with him ... shortly after our marriage was annulled, Julian died. He was out fishing and he had a sunstroke.” (If spoken aloud

in a bemused tone of voice, this could be a Jean Arthur line in a screwball comedy.)



Although Jean Arthur hated publicity, she nevertheless had to submit to it just like everyone else. In four shots from the late 1920s and early 1930s, she posed as a bunny for an Easter promotion ... reminded magazine readers which perfume was suitable for a formal occasion ... golfed (in appropriate duds) ... and posed for the ubiquitous “here is my dog” shot.

Despite being “independent,” Arthur went forward and the machine had no trouble selling her. She might well be difficult, independent, reclusive—but soon she’d be all that at a theatre near you, playing a delightful, spunky, vivacious leading lady, a good gal pal that you’ll all realize *does* shoot her mouth off, but oddball that she is, you’re just gonna love her. And identify with her. The machine turned out to be right. The public *did* identify with her and love her, and rightly so. Jean Arthur might have been a handful, but up on the screen she was divine.

Arthur is fascinating because of her bizarre relationship to the star machine, but also because she represents how a movie star can be defined and shaped by the work of great film directors. The machine knew how to allow specific directorial talents to help build its stars. Auteurs could beget auteurs. This was particularly true for Arthur. Few female stars consistently worked with as many top-ranked directors. As a result, her films stand the test of time as well as those of any other actress from her era. She starred in films for Cecil B. DeMille, Howard Hawks, Frank Borzage, George Stevens, Billy Wilder, John Ford, Frank Capra, and even lesser lights with distinctive touches such as Mitchell Leisen, John Cromwell, William Seiter, Wesley Ruggles, and Sam Wood. She had what few actresses ever got—a series of enormously talented men to add dimension to her talent, to provide her with memorable moments in significant roles, to give her everything she needed to enhance her inborn talent. John Ford helped the young Arthur find out who she could be on film. DeMille found her tomboy spirit as Calamity Jane in *The Plainsman* (1936), opposite Gary Cooper. Hawks found her one-of-the-boys charm with Cary Grant in *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939). Borzage brilliantly illuminated the depth of her loving spirit in *History Is Made at Night* (1937), while Stevens found her honest, girl-next-door qualities in *The Talk of the Town* (1942) and *The More the Merrier* (1943). Billy Wilder knew how to use her when she was older, making her a prim congresswoman from Iowa with fire buried inside her soul in *A Foreign Affair* (1948).

But it was Frank Capra who released Arthur’s passion, and her ability to play a virginal sensuousness became one of her

trademarks.* No one ever conveyed the female yearning for sex any better than she did, nor any more sweetly without seeming prudish. No one was ever better at holding herself in on-screen while a handsome man made love to her, and no one was ever better at showing that, if she did decide to let go, the world was going to have to stand back. Consumed with love, Arthur is luminous. Her delicious voice quirks up a notch when a man kisses her. She leans forward, pulls back, and never seems cold, only decent. Capra used this quality in all his films, but George Stevens took it to the highest level in *The More the Merrier*. While Arthur and Joel McCrea sit outside on her apartment steps and utter banalities, he kisses her over and over again while she tries to maintain her equilibrium. She embodies the plight of the 1940s female. She wants him. She can't have him. But if she could only get him! Arthur is the quintessential well-brought-up American young woman with deep and honest desires. She's the queen of conveying the true feeling of delicious sexual frustration.

There is no star story quite like Jean Arthur's. Born Gladys Georgianna Greene in 1905,[†] she changed her name to Jean Arthur in 1923, the year she began her film career. Growing up, Arthur had professed interest in becoming many different things—a tightrope walker (highly prophetic, in its way), a teacher of romance languages, and ultimately a photographer's model. She had been successful at the latter, and a lovely shot of her taken by the famous Howard Chandler Christy caught the eye of the inevitable movie talent scout. All her life, Arthur had been a movie fan (Mary Pickford was her favorite), and she couldn't resist the offer from a Fox talent scout to come to Hollywood for a screen test. She was young and lovely, and her test, despite no previous acting experience, went well. She was offered the starring role in a movie to be called *The Temple of Venus* (1923). A few days after shooting began, she was fired. Later, she pointed to this experience as “where and why I developed the most beautiful inferiority complex you've ever seen.” She was replaced by Mary Philbin.

Fox decided not to give up on her, though, and cast her in a smaller role more suitable to her lack of experience, a supporting part in John Ford's *Cameo Kirby* (1923), which would star John Gilbert. ‡ She played the best friend of the heroine (Gertrude Olmstead), but she was in good company in a quality production based on a Booth Tarkington and Harry Leon Wilson play. The rest of her first year in movies was spent mostly in two-reelers. As a result, she decided to freelance, the beginning of her expression of dissatisfaction with the system. Since she found only two projects on her own (a one-reeler for Universal and a feature called *The Powerful Eye*), Arthur made a choice she would repeat throughout her working life. She opted for security and went to work under contract for Weiss Bros/Action Films, where she became a star in low-budget westerns. Between 1923 and 1928—a span of only six years—Arthur appeared in more than forty movies. Most of these are totally unknown today, and have names like *Biff Bang Buddy*, *Fast and Fearless*, *Roaring Rider*, *Riding Rivals*, and *The Cowboy Cop*. She was always billed second to the male cowboy, but she was never less than the leading lady. During this period, she occasionally also played small parts, such as her appearance in the other excellent movie she made in silent films, Buster Keaton's 1925 *Seven Chances*. Arthur portrays a receptionist, and she has one excellent scene in which it might be said that she enacts what we'd later recognize as a "Jean Arthur" moment. Keaton, desperate to marry in order to claim his inheritance, proposes to her as she sits reading a book. She doesn't even look up at him. She just holds up her arm and waves her wedding ring in his face.

In early 1928, Arthur was invited to the prestigious Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios to take a screen test for a role opposite their popular leading man William "Billy" Haines. She didn't get the part, but she did get her own copy of the test. She took it to Paramount Pictures and sold herself by pointing out that she was an experienced actress with solid credentials and MGM was trying to sign her. Paramount wasted no time, giving her a three-year contract, which would last until 1931. At Paramount, Jean Arthur

went into a transition between her silent and sound careers, which coincided with the transition of the entire studio system from silent to sound movies. She was safely under contract to a major studio and ready to move up the ladder.

Instead, she began to drift. Having already established herself as a working movie star, she wasn't a candidate for the studio's buildup or promotional push. Like others who had already arrived in silents, she was simply moved over into the "star" roster when talkies took over. If she had been relatively new to the top, like Loretta Young, or if she had been a big-name silent star, like Garbo, Norma Shearer or Janet Gaynor, she would have been groomed or regroomed or at least treated with more care. It wasn't that Paramount had no work for her, or that her films were duds, or even that she went unnoticed in them. It was just that she never seemed to get off the plateau of "star in the movies" rather than bona fide talking "motion picture star."

Looking back today, it seems hard to understand why Paramount didn't do more with Arthur then. One of her most distinctive characteristics was her unusual speaking voice, a quirky asset many have tried to describe. She sounds as if she's about to scream but is swallowing her yelps, pulling them back into a plummy tone enhanced by an unusual cadence and rhythm. Sound might have given her career the kind of boost it gave others with unusual voices, like Charles Boyer and William Powell. Her first three films with sound were synch-sound.* Her first *real* sound and dialogue movie didn't happen until 1929. It was the Philo Vance detective story *The Canary Murder Case*, starring William Powell. Arthur is somewhat stilted in her delivery and was said to have been deeply disappointed over her role and her performance. Nevertheless, immediately following *Canary's* release, she was elected as one of the annual WAMPAS Baby Stars of 1929. This was a publicity ploy in which executives from the Western Association of Motion Picture Advertisers (WAMPAS) chose a group of female newcomers each year as "promising stars." (WAMPAS also chose for that year Loretta Young, Helen Twelvetrees, and Anita Page. Lest they seem like geniuses, it might also be noted that other names on their list were

Mona Rico, Ethlyne Clair, and Caryl Lincoln. WAMPAS baby stars were selected only from 1922 to 1934.) After *Stairs of Sand* (1929), a silent based on a Zane Grey novel, and *The Mysterious Dr. Fu Manchu* (1929), in which she's Fu's adopted daughter, Arthur was put into the next Philo Vance mystery, *The Greene Murder Case* (1929) and, although billed fourth, played a significant role as an icky sweet and innocent girl who, naturally, turns out to be the murderess. Her next movie, *The Saturday Night Kid* (1929), is one often searched for "the beginning of Jean Arthur as Jean Arthur." She is also often "found" in others of her early Paramount sound films: in small moments in her Philo Vance films with William Powell, or in *Street of Chance* (1930) with Powell and Kay Francis, or in *The Silver Horde* (1930, for RKO) opposite Joel McCrea. It has even been said that the obscure *Young Eagles* (1930) offers the first real "Jean Arthur" character. Since she plays a German spy who isn't really German but an American girl pretending to be a German spy, one can only wonder. (One film that *no* one thinks had the "real Jean Arthur" is RKO's 1930 *Danger Lights*, in which she is a drab and routinely written female love interest.)

However, the film most often cited is *The Saturday Night Kid*, which starred the delightful Clara Bow. Arthur plays Bow's sister, a strange idea, and someone apparently mixed up the assignments. Bow plays a self-sacrificing, reliable department store worker and Arthur plays a wild and irresponsible type who steals Bow's boyfriend without caring about him and who also gambles and loses money, placing the blame on poor Clara. The one thing to be learned from *The Saturday Night Kid* is that Jean Arthur on film is no villain. It wasn't that she couldn't play it, but she doesn't generate selfishness or evil, nor does she have a vixenish personality, particularly not while inhabiting the same frame as Clara Bow.

In 1931, by the standards of the machine, Arthur wasn't locating a type, or no type was being located for her. Offscreen she lived with her mother (and a bunch of pets, according to the movie magazines). She openly acknowledged she had made no close friends in Hollywood. (Speaking about this period later, in *Screenland* magazine in 1939, in one of her many "I am miserable"

interviews, Jean Arthur said that she was “frustrated at every turn ... no one was particularly interested in me and I had not developed a strength of personality to make anyone believe I had special talents. I wanted so desperately to succeed that I drove myself relentlessly ... no time off for pleasures, or for friendships ... yet ... I was still floundering.”)

Motion Picture magazine of May 1930 nailed the problem: “The success story of Jean Arthur is always being written. But it always turns out to be a little premature. Every so often she seems to have beaten the game, and things that she does are hailed with enthusiasm and excitement. But afterwards nothing ever seems to happen.” Arthur would go forward one square and back two. Different things had been tried: serious roles, funny roles; good girls, bad girls. Her hair had been lightened, and an attempt to spruce up her image with clothes and makeup had been undertaken, but she hadn’t really broken through. It wasn’t clear who she was. Finally, in 1931, Paramount Pictures decided to drop three females from their roster, terminating their three-year contracts. One of the women was Jean Arthur. (The other two were Fay Wray and Mary Brian.)

In the spring of 1931, Jean Arthur left Hollywood, believing her movie career was finished. After her later rise to fame, this departure was often cited as proof of her “bravery” in flouting the studio system, but she herself eschewed any attempts to compliment her in this regard. She described her move as motivated by practical needs, not bravery. “I had been in Hollywood long enough to know which way the wind was blowing. If I couldn’t get stronger parts with the studio where I’d been, why expect the others to have faith in me? I knew I had potentialities, but no one else sensed it. So I just quit altogether ... I wasn’t demonstrating any noble ability.”

Arthur went to New York and, in January 1932, began what she hoped would become a successful stage career in *Lysistrata*.^{*} She played the role of Kalonika for a touring company that later opened on Broadway. (She also took the significant step of marrying Frank Ross Jr. in June 1932. She had met Ross on the set of *Young Eagles*.[†])

By the end of 1933, Jean Arthur had appeared in eight theatrical productions, not one of which had lasted any significant amount of time. *The Curtain Rises* was her longest Broadway run, at sixty-one performances. After it closed, she returned to California, allegedly to visit her parents (who now lived in Beverly Hills).^{*} The studios saw her second arrival as an indication that she had given up on theatre, “had come to her senses,” and was ready to work in movies again. Offers began to come in. She later said she accepted the one from Columbia Pictures, a “Poverty Row” studio, for one simple reason and one reason only: They agreed to allow her to make films for them between her Broadway engagements. In February 1934, Jean Arthur signed a five-year contract with Columbia. By May of that same year, her first film from her new studio was in neighborhood theatres. It was called *Whirlpool*.

Whirlpool co-starred Arthur with Jack Holt. It was a small movie, even for a cheapie studio like Columbia, but she breezed through it, no doubt envisioning a glorious future in which, financially secure from her Columbia contract, she would glamorously train between Hollywood and Broadway, enjoying a prestigious theatrical stardom paid for by movies. Perhaps feeling no obligation to be great (her contract was signed) and with no worries about her future, Arthur was more relaxed in *Whirlpool* than she had ever been before. The movie creature that today is known to be “Jean Arthur” peeked out at the audience. She quickly shot two other small films, *The Defense Rests* (1934), again with Jack Holt, and *The Most Precious Thing in Life* (1934), with Richard Cromwell and Anita Louise. Despite her success in *Whirlpool*, it’s obvious no one yet knows how to cast her. In *The Most Precious Thing in Life* she’s an unwed mother who lives to a drab old age just so she can sacrifice herself for her son, who, of course, doesn’t know she’s his mom. However, movie audiences around the country were being treated to a “new Jean Arthur movie” in May, and again in August and then again in November of 1934. She was becoming established.

Following the terms of her agreement with Columbia, the studio released her to return to New York. On September 13, 1934, she opened on Broadway at Henry Miller’s Theatre in a play entitled *The*

Bride of Torozko, directed by Herman Shumlin and starring Lionel Stander, Victor Killian, Sam Jaffe, and Van Heflin. It closed after twelve performances and lousy reviews. Despite her elegant plans and best hopes, Jean Arthur would not appear again on the Broadway stage—or any stage—until a New Haven tryout for *Born Yesterday* in 1945. In that aborted adventure she would last only from December 20 to New Year's Day, the day she fled the production.

Arthur, of course, didn't realize it was going to be 1945 before she returned to the theatre. What she did realize was that it was time to do what she had to do for Columbia again. She slogged back to Hollywood, heeding the siren call of money, and was warmly welcomed. *Whirlpool* was doing well, and she was getting excellent reviews. Her other two little movies were also solid box office, and the studio had her next project lined up and waiting. It had been written by Jo Swerling and Robert Riskin, based on a story by W. R. Burnett, and it would pair her with Edward G. Robinson, surround her with a first-rate cast of well-known character actors, and be directed by John Ford.

Arthur was comfortable with Ford, the man who had directed her in her first movie, *Cameo Kirby* (1923). Her part was fairly small, and she knew it was Robinson's movie. But once again, she thought her stage career was under way, she was financially safe, and she didn't feel concerned about what was going to happen to her as a result of *The Whole Town's Talking* (1935). She arrived on set with a casual self-confidence of a kind she had seldom displayed at work, and John Ford captured it on film.

Whirlpool had shown audiences a zingy, smart-talking Arthur. *The Whole Town's Talking* upped the ante and delivered an out-and-out hardboiled babe. Arthur talked tough, acted tough. The roughness suited her raspy voice and her less-than-glamorous looks. In fact, it suited *her*. She took the hardness in stride, and laid it out easy, with a charm and a certain gutter elegance. The film was a very big hit. Robinson (in a dual role as a meek bank clerk and a look-alike gangster) received the majority of the raves, but Arthur had found her groove. Writing in his autobiography, Robinson said

Arthur was “a curious, neurotic actress with so touching and appealing a nature that she really brought a new dimension to the screen ... no curlylocks ... hardly pretty by the ancient Hollywood standards, with a voice that grated ... she was whimsical without being silly, unique without being nutty, a theatrical personality who was an untheatrical person.”

Although *Whirlpool* had hinted at what Arthur could be, *The Whole Town's Talking* delivered “Jean Arthur.” In 1935 she was born in the Ford film and became a brand-new personality, even though she'd been in the business for a decade. To capitalize on her success, she rapidly made five movies, all released in 1935: *Party Wire*, *Public Hero #1*, *Diamond Jim*, *The Public Menace*, and the charming *If You Could Only Cook*. None was distinguished, but all were solid and presented her well, though none advanced the “Arthur” type.* Was the Jean Arthur curse of seeming to arrive but never getting there going to strike all over again?

No; this time was different. John Ford was close friends with Frank Capra, and he invited Capra to look at *The Whole Town's Talking*. Ford really liked Jean Arthur, but he didn't know what else he could do with her.† Capra did. As he earlier had with Barbara Stanwyck, Capra saw something in Arthur that no one else had yet fully discovered. In fact, he saw two things, and one of them was his own wife, Lu, a woman of intelligence, humor, feisty responses, and her own distinctive voice. Lu was a career woman and a perfect companion for men and friend to other women. (My husband once remarked that “Lu Capra is the woman all women should be.”) The other thing Capra saw in Arthur was probably who she really was: a shy, vulnerable woman who yearned for something, hoped for something, but who had so far been doomed to tender disappointment. Capra combined these two elements into Arthur's screen personality. He found a way to reveal her luminous femininity without cracking the amusing hard shell that contained it.

Although it wasn't Capra who made Jean Arthur unique—nature had done that—it was Frank Capra who made her unique on-screen.

("Jean Arthur is my favorite actress," he said, adding, "probably because she was unique.") He took her into the star machine process under his own aegis. He lightened her hair, taking pains to get just the right shade to frame her face.[‡] Having been told by studio head Harry Cohn that Arthur's face was half "angel" and half "horse," Capra took time to test her carefully, working with studio cameramen to find the best way to photograph her, and he studied the results. He was always shrewd about casting and understanding the "meaning" any actor could convey. If Arthur *were* half angel and half horse—an idea he personally never subscribed to—then that meant she contained opposite selves. She could look tough and professional on the one hand but feminine and desirable on the other. Capra worked with the idea that Jean Arthur was therefore a modern heroine for the 1930s. Enchanted with her voice ("low ... husky ... at times it broke pleasingly into the octaves like a thousand tinkling bells"), he spent extended time with Arthur, talking to her and learning her insecurities and her desires for perfection. Always a master at devising bits of "business" for his actors, he worked especially hard to find something for her to do in a scene that would make her comfortable, that would cause her to forget she was under scrutiny. (One of the most famous is the little game with a string that she plays while she talks in her first scenes in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* [1936].) Capra took Arthur out of herself, removed the bars of her cage by giving her these little actions that were funny on their own but easy for her and appropriate to her character. Capra said, "When she did comedy, she relaxed. She never thought about whether a line was funny. She was a natural." He saw her as a perfect romantic foil for the main male character, always *his* central interest. When he had come to feel comfortable with her—and she with him—Capra cast Arthur in the role of a lifetime, Babe Bennett, a newspaperwoman in *Mr. Deeds*. Babe's a brassy go-getter who knows how to trick a guy by pretending to be sweet. Arthur was asked to play hard, then a fake "soft," then really soft. It was an acting turnaround in 115 minutes that would ruin the film if the audience didn't believe it. Arthur's performance is subtle.

She falls slowly in love with Deeds, seeming to be astonished at her own vulnerability to his bumpkin charms. The excellent script and superb direction make her change plausible, but it is Arthur who makes it work. It seems possible that her sharpness, her worldly reportorial experience, would in the end cause her to unmask the real truth about Long-fellow Deeds—he's a helluva guy. (And he looks like Gary Cooper!)



Director Frank Capra (*at right, in chair*) was a primary force in shaping Jean Arthur's screen persona, and they remained friends to the end. This shot is part of Capra's own collection, as James Stewart and Arthur relax with him on the set of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*.



Two of Jean Arthur's hits from the 1930s: with Gary Cooper in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* ...

Mr. Deeds Goes to Town was released in April 1936, and it was an enormous success, receiving five Oscar nominations, with Frank Capra winning Best Director for his work. Jean Arthur's second career now took off at the highest level, having been shaped and influenced by a series of events that came together at just the right time. She found directors John Ford and Frank Capra, a new studio in Columbia with new ideas about how to use her and redesign her looks, and the historical emergence of a new kind of brassy screwball heroine that suited her quirky voice and her breezy style. There was, of course, one other issue. Jean Arthur had decided to come back to Hollywood for another try. She might have hated it, but she returned to it willingly.

After *Mr. Deeds*, Jean Arthur's screen type was officially set. For the rest of her movie career, she played some variation of Babe Bennett. She could be softer. She could be harder. She could be more naïve or less naïve. She could be a tomboy, working girl, wife,

cowboy settler, lady sharpshooter, or newspaper gal. But she was always, in some way, Babe Bennett. She had found her type.

Mr. Deeds was also the beginning of something else for Arthur: the top level of stardom that demanded steady coverage in the press, lots of interviews, lots of photographs. She wasn't a kid anymore, and she wasn't starry-eyed about it. As she had moved up, she had cooperated—and then complained. Now she began to complain and try not to cooperate. Although she was always professional, her unhappiness began to overwhelm her.



... and with Ray Milland in *Easy Living*.

As always, the fan magazines worked with the studios, but behind the scenes, rumors started to circulate that she was going out of control. She had started crying in the middle of an interview. She had canceled an appointment with a reporter who had traveled a long distance to talk with her. She had thrown up on the set, too nervous to work. She had canceled a photo shoot, ripping a hated wig off her head and throwing it to the floor, stomping on it, and screaming that she wouldn't wear it a minute longer. She had thrown a major temper tantrum on a set, stalking off to her dressing

room to hide and sulk. She had ripped a costume to pieces. She had entered a press party and suddenly turned around and dashed back out the door. In Hollywood, such actions were like war crimes. Arthur's magazine quotes began to sound increasingly desperate. "I am not an adult. That's my explanation of myself." "I'm ashamed of myself." "I can't seem to be able to do the things grown-up people do. I can't go to parties." "I haven't any friends. I have no small talk." "All the movie star things are painful to me, but what can I do about it all?"



James Stewart and Jean Arthur were beautifully paired in two of Frank Capra's biggest hits: *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* ...

None of this angst ever appeared on-screen. She gave one delicious performance after another. Even in weak material, she was refreshing and original. Among her releases were *The Ex-Mrs. Bradford* (1936), *The Plainsman* (1936), *History Is Made at Night* (1937), *Easy Living* (1937), *You Can't Take It with You* (1938), *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939),

Arizona (1940), and others. Arthur was one of Hollywood's most distinctive and best-loved leading ladies.

As she aged, avoiding publicity became increasingly important to her, a movie star whose livelihood depended partly on getting it. She began to talk about her problems even more publicly. "We play in pictures ... huge sums of money are spent to build up a star's personality. We create an illusion on the screen ... but I can't be glamorous like, say, Marlene Dietrich ... so I try to keep out of the public's eye as much as possible." (Privately, she said, "I'd rather cut my throat than give an interview.")

Despite such harshly articulated feelings, however, Jean Arthur soldiered onward in the publicity march. In March 1940, for instance, she cooperated fully with *Life* magazine for a feature entitled "*Life* Goes Calling On Seclusive Jean Arthur in Her California Home." Readers were treated to a four-page insider's view of Arthur's private life, giving a definitive example of Jean Arthur's public stance. "Next to Garbo," runs the text, "Jean Arthur is Hollywood's reigning mystery queen." Her terms are "no interviews, no publicity stunts, no personal pictures." Nonetheless, she has posed for a series of photographs in which she trots out her husband, her home, her pets, and her most intimate living spaces. Right above the "no personal pictures" edict is a black-and-white shot of her in a snug sweater and slacks, cuddling her dog on her lawn. Right below is another; this time she's lying coquettishly on a window seat in "her bedroom" while she reads *Kitty Foyle*. That photo's caption tells readers that Arthur "loves the solitude of her Brentwood home," which is seen to have ruffled curtains, big chintz pillows, and a phonograph. *Life's* photographer (Herbert Gehr) testifies that Arthur was "completely gracious, a happy wife, and a charming hostess." To prove how gracious and charming—though maybe not how happy—the layout presents photos of Arthur in her living room (big soft chairs, a fireplace), sitting on her canopied bed ("her favorite hideout"), pouring herself a cup of tea while having lunch on her terrace with her "producer husband," and in her dining room, where they give lavish dinner parties to which "studio colleagues are rarely invited." Arthur appears in eleven large

photos, changing her outfits from slacks to dress to her favorite “taffeta housecoat.” Looking at this spread today, one sees that whatever Arthur felt, she did cooperate with the star machine.



... and *You Can't Take It with You* (Mary Forbes plays Stewart's wealthy mother and, to Arthur's right, Edward Arnold plays his father).

As Arthur's fame grew, and her unease increased, Columbia's publicity office continued to help her by putting an effective spin on her situation. They not only turned her “I need my privacy” into a publicity gimmick but found other ways to work with the problem. The August 1942 issue of *Screenland* carried an article entitled “Gentle Lady” in which the author not only sang Arthur's praises but reassured everyone about her. “Don't ever let anyone try to convince you that because this girl runs away from autograph seekers and because she gets panicky when people talk to her that she resents them ... she is very shy.” The article tells how Arthur always serves tea and cookies, how the crew loves her and laughs “merrily” at all her witticisms, and how (subtle warning) “the lady

minds her own business.” Another publicity article, allegedly written by John Wayne for *Screenland* in 1943, lamented that Arthur was “the most criticized star in all Hollywood.” It was not only because she was shy but, and this is a star machine corker, “Hollywood is so anti-Arthur ... [because] she is just *too* normal. The natives here aren’t help to anyone who is *consistently* normal.”



Jean Arthur received her only Oscar nomination for *The More the Merrier*: in braids with Charles Coburn, who won Best Supporting Actor ...

In 1942, Arthur made her first film with George Stevens, the director who, along with Capra, understood her best. (Both men respected the truth in her performances.) Arthur’s three movies with Stevens not only are among her best, but also are three that allow her to be a full, womanly creature. In *The Talk of the Town* (1942), *The More the Merrier* (1943), and her last film, *Shane* (1953), Jean Arthur reaches her maturity not just as a comedienne but also as an actress.



... and separated from her love interest, Joel McCrea, by a required wall.

In *The Talk of the Town* Stevens gave Jean Arthur not one but two perfect leading men, Ronald Colman and Cary Grant. They might be seen to embody two different sides of her screen self, and thus Stevens made Arthur both the heart and the soul of his movie. Colman is elegant, intelligent, and while not without humor and insight, a man who is being considered for a Supreme Court seat and who is thus aware of propriety, of correctness. He is the spinster side of Arthur, her virginal character who can be prim, even too prim. Cary Grant is an anarchist, a man with passion and humor who accepts the human condition as he finds it. He's Arthur's screwball comedy self. The two men are her options, and it's a credit to her, to them, and to their director that until the very last moment, a viewer isn't sure which man she'll end up with. It could be either one, and either one could be right. The depth of Arthur's characters, the contradictions she represented, made this both possible and satisfactory.

The Talk of the Town was followed by her second Stevens feature, the movie many feel is her best and the one that brought her the only Oscar nomination she ever received, *The More the Merrier*. She had appeared in many of the most popular films of her era, and male co-stars like Gary Cooper (in *Mr. Deeds*) and Jimmy Stewart (in *Mr. Smith*) were given nominations, but never Arthur. Although it was common for actresses in comedies to be overlooked, many felt Arthur wasn't nominated as often as she should have been because she was labeled "uncooperative," the kiss of death in Hollywood. By the beginning of the 1940s, the spin doctoring on Arthur's complaints wasn't working in the business itself. In 1942, Hedda Hopper—always the one to administer the kick to the butt—came right out and called Arthur "the most unpopular woman in Hollywood." And that same year, she was awarded the annual Women's Press Club "Sour Apple Award" for being uncooperative. When those ladies put their hats on and got together to make it hard for an actress, they were a formidable bunch.

And so it was that Jean Arthur lost her only Oscar bid to Jennifer Jones, who won for *The Song of Bernadette*—for whatever reasons. The last laugh does go to Arthur, who has won the Historical Sweepstakes. *The More the Merrier* is often revived to great delight, and Arthur's performance is as romantic, as sexy, and as funny and perfectly timed as it ever was. Despite a radiant young Jones, *The Song of Bernadette* is a chore.

Jean Arthur made her final picture for Columbia, a lackluster affair called *The Impatient Years*,* co-starring her with an equally lackluster leading man, Lee Bowman. (It was supposed to have been Joel McCrea.) When *The Impatient Years* was released in September 1944, it was time to renew her contract. Jean Arthur finally decided that now she really *would* quit, leaving her home studio after ten years of top-quality work. (It was rumored she ran through the studio screaming, "I'm free, I'm free!") It was 1944, she was thirty-nine years old, and she would make only two more movies, *A Foreign Affair* in 1948 and *Shane* in 1953. Now began a period during which many rumors surface about films she was to appear in

but didn't: *The Voice of the Turtle*, *Anna and the King of Siam*, *The Bishop's Wife*, *Friendly Persuasion*.

In 1945 Jean Arthur agreed to take the role of Billie Dawn, in Garson Kanin's Broadway-bound new play, *Born Yesterday*. The role appeared to have been tailor-made for her. Dawn is another of those theatrical dumb blondes who turn out to be smarter than anyone else. She's the "friend" of an ambitious junk dealer (played by Paul Douglas in the play, Broderick Crawford in the later film) who hires an intellectual to teach Billie some manners, history, and culture so she'll be more presentable as he climbs the ladder. Problems surfaced in out-of-town tryouts. Arthur began to have doubts about her abilities, and furthermore she felt her romantic leading man (the intellectual, as played by Richard E. Davis) was not going to work out. Davis was replaced by Gary Merrill, but he appeared only in the final performance in Boston. Arthur withdrew from the production before tryouts in Philadelphia, and later explained by saying, "I'll admit I was worried about my ability to play farce ... I usually played comedy. But I was also violently ill ... I blacked out on-stage."[†]

After this disappointment, Arthur once again went back to where she belonged: Hollywood, her security blanket, to appear in one of her greatest roles as star of Billy Wilder's *A Foreign Affair*, the last time moviegoers would see on-screen the Jean Arthur they had fallen in love with. As Congresswoman Phoebe Frost (from Iowa), Arthur is the only member of a fact-finding committee who's got her eyes open. In the ruins of postwar Berlin she observes fraternization, the black market, a shady Marlene Dietrich who still has Nazi connections—and a handsome hunk from her home state, played by John Lund. Phoebe Frost is tailor-made for the forty-two-year-old Arthur, who's not afraid to perform as an overly efficient, note-taking, badly dressed frump with glasses. It's one of the few roles frankly written for a middle-aged actress in which she can fall in love, discover her sexuality, kick up her heels, and not pay. (When Katharine Hepburn later takes on such a role in *Summertime* [1955], it turns into a tearjerker, with Katie waving good-bye to her man as

she goes home alone to Akron. Arthur bags her guy and takes him with her. No cold nights in Iowa for her!) The duality that was increasingly explored for Arthur as she aged is put to good use: On the one hand, she's buttoned up and crisply disapproving of bad behavior. On the other, she's hanging off the chandelier in an off-limits nightclub, leading the crowd in singing her state song. And when she unbends for Lund, she is, as always, exactly right in portraying a woman moving into accepting physical love with all the fear and delight she can muster.

Because of the considerable success of Wilder's film, Arthur accepted a three-picture contract with Paramount Pictures that gave her refusal rights on any film she was offered. She seemed to have her life in order, and began attending classes at Bennington College. She divorced her husband, Frank Ross, and happily started work on one of her lifelong ambitions: to play Peter Pan on-stage, opening in New York on April 24, 1950, and receiving excellent reviews, such as Brooks Atkinson's *New York Times* statement, "Miss Arthur is ideal as Peter." Almost immediately, however, she began experiencing doubts. The *Times* reported on her reaction to the thunderous applause she received on opening night by saying she stood in front of the audience "looking very much like an urchin who's just been trapped ... [she] stood there bewildered, overwhelmed and uncomfortable." Her Captain Hook (Boris Karloff) had to rescue her by stepping forward to say, "I think I can say that Miss Arthur wishes to thank you." Later, Arthur herself said, "I just didn't know how to act; I didn't know what to do." By summer she wasn't showing up at the theatre and was in conflict with her producers. The show closed in 1951.

In retrospect, it seems clear that Arthur's insecurities prevented her from acting where she really wanted to be: on the stage. Movies allowed her distance from her audience, and however much she complained about what was expected of her in Hollywood, with the security of the movie set, shut off from potential critics and a judgmental audience, Arthur could and did perform to perfection. After *Peter Pan* she returned to Hollywood to make what would be her final film, although no one knew that at the time. She was forty-

seven years old, with a secure contract, and the film she was stepping into would become one of her most famous. It was *Shane*, her first and only movie made in color, which premiered in early April 1953 (although it was shot in 1951). She hadn't made a movie in five years, and none of her stage projects had really worked out. The movie was to be directed by the man she later said was her favorite, George Stevens, and would co-star her with one of the big box office stars of his era, Alan Ladd.

Shane is considered a classic, but it's not a showcase for Arthur. She plays the wife of homesteader Van Heflin and the mother of Brandon De Wilde, the little boy who calls out, "Shane ... Shane" for all eternity. Her part is small, but she makes it count. A lesser actress might have dulled the movie's impact, but it's sad that Jean Arthur leaves the screen without a touch of comedy, a touch of glamour, or any single big moment of her own. (She said about her part, "I didn't like it ... I just had to act old and worn out.")

After *Shane*, Arthur owed Paramount two more films, but she wasn't interested in anything they offered her. Paramount wasn't particularly excited about anything for her either, and the studio decided to buy her out for \$200,000. As she left town yet again, Arthur's movie career had come to a close without anyone really understanding that it had happened, and Arthur herself hadn't closed the door on the idea of more movies. Leaving town, after all, was a way of life for her.



Jean Arthur at the end of her career, opposite Alan Ladd and (*in her arms*) Van Heflin, in *Shane*, one of the most famous westerns ever made.

Jean Arthur now embarked on what might be called “the rest of her life.” She moved toward a pre-Broadway tour in a play she had always wanted to do, Shaw’s *Saint Joan*. “I love Joan!” she said cheerfully. “She was a nonconformist too ... she just wanted everyone to go home and mind their own business.” Unfortunately for Arthur, “everyone” did. The show closed pre-Broadway, although later she would do a limited engagement of it at the University of California (in 1964). She appeared on television in an episode of *Gunsmoke* in 1965, which led to her having her own television series, *The Jean Arthur Show*, which ran for only twelve episodes. Next she went to a comedy called *The Freaking Out of Stephanie Blake*, which began previews in New York on October 30, 1967, and which closed on November 1. It would be six years before she tried again. She appeared on Merv Griffin’s show in 1974 for a chitchat with a man she trusted, seeming to indicate that she herself didn’t believe her film career was really over. In 1975, she

undertook an aborted run in *First Monday in October*, in which she left the cast of the pre-Broadway tryout after only twelve days of performances.*

After she left Hollywood for good, Arthur's life rattled on, and as old films were revived on television, in repertory theatres, and on college campuses, she was much in demand. She frequently received offers for movie roles that never materialized, such as the Rosalind Russell part in *The Trouble with Angels* (1966). Certainly she was wanted for interviews and retrospectives, but she began to withdraw more and more. She taught at Vassar for a spell, and she cared about causes, particularly animals.

In her final years, she lived the life she had always threatened to embrace, that of a recluse, in Carmel, California. She walked on the beach, avoided crowds, took care of her pets and her garden, and finally faced no public criticism, either real or imagined. A stroke in 1989 left her an invalid, and she died in June 1991.

Her fame had been large, but her desire had always been for the work, not the trappings that came with it. "I feel that my work should be the only important thing," she said, and since that seemed truly to be the case, Jean Arthur had nothing to worry about. She may have been "odd" or "eccentric" or "independent," but whatever she was offscreen, on-screen she was a miracle, and her work is as fresh today as it ever was.

* Deanna would turn fifteen in December, and Judy had just turned fourteen in June.

* When both Garland and Durbin became big stars, MGM edited the film short down to eleven minutes and rereleased it under the name *Every Sunday Afternoon*.

† While Durbin became a big star in 1937, Garland also moved ahead. From August of that year to the following September, she would make and release four movies in which she was starred: *Thoroughbreds Don't Cry*, *Everybody Sing*, *Love Finds Andy Hardy*, and *Listen, Darling*. These movies were programmers, and she was successful, but not at Durbin's level. She would find the role that brought her to the very top in *The Wizard of Oz*, released in 1939, and would rank in the top ten box office stars in 1940, 1941, 1945, and 1946.

* This remark was attributed to Jack Sherrill, an agent, by *Fortune* magazine in a December 1939 article entitled "Deanna Durbin." The article also said Durbin was born in 1922, and

that Sherrill, not LeMaire, was her primary discoverer. It is difficult to find facts that agree in stories regarding movie star origins.

† It would be released to the general public in January 1937.

* All fan mail addressed to a specific star was sorted into that star's own personal mail bin and counted as a weekly total. These counts were taken very seriously by the business.

† Stars tried to sign their own photos and autographs, but the requests usually got away from them as the numbers mounted. Autograph books and autograph seekers who would do anything to get a star's signature were a big thing in the 1930s and 1940s.

* On-screen, she sang a wide range of material: "Silent Night," the "Alleluia" from Mozart's *Exultate Jubilate*, "Ave Maria," "I Love to Whistle," "Un Bel Di," "Amapola," "The Old Folks at Home," "The Lord's Prayer," "Clavelitos," "Say a Little Prayer for the Boys over There," "When I Sing"—which was the waltz from the *Sleeping Beauty* ballet with lyrics added—"Begin the Beguine," "Always," "Danny Boy," "Pace, Pace, Mio Dio," and "Let Me Call You Sweetheart," and more. She could sing any type of song and put it over.

* Pasternak was one of a large group of Hungarian immigrants who succeeded in Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s. He had arrived in America as a teenager and found his way to Paramount Studios, where he worked his way up the ladder. In 1928, he landed a secure job at Universal Pictures when he was hired to return to Europe to run their Berlin office. He held this job until 1935, not only managing the studio's interests but also producing four movies starring the popular Franciska Gaal (who had a brief attempt at stardom in America). As the Nazis rose to power, Pasternak begged Universal to return him to the safety of America. He brought with him two key people from his office, director Henry Koster and writer Felix Jackson, both of whom would be important in Durbin's career. (Later, Pasternak brought over his brother-in-law, the delightful S. Z. "Cuddles" Sakall.)

† He did something similar for Marlene Dietrich, jolting her out of her "box office poison" label by casting her in the boisterous western *Destry Rides Again* (1939). Pasternak helped to make Dietrich into the concept of a "good guy" rather than the rare orchid she had been under von Sternberg's direction.

* Pasternak would leave Universal and Durbin in 1942, when he was hired by prestigious Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. There he headed his own production unit, and although his films never had the cachet of those made by his rival producer, Arthur Freed, he nevertheless made first-rate movies that succeeded with the public, using stars such as Garland, Sinatra, Jane Powell (the Durbinesque young singer), and Mario Lanza.

* Shirley Temple had been the first winner of this “miniature” award in 1934. Others were Judy Garland (1939), Margaret O’Brien (1944), Peggy Ann Garner (1945), Ivan Jandl (1948), Bobby Driscoll (1949), Jon Whiteley (1954), and Hayley Mills (1960).

* *Fortune* pays particular attention to the money Durbin is making and generating for Universal, and to the merchandising that is trademarked with her name: cotton dresses, silk dresses, sportswear, pajamas, robes, hats, bags, dolls, paper dolls, records, songbooks, and sheet music.

* Cotten had an interesting year in 1943. Two movies in which he starred were released: *Hers to Hold*, in which he’s Durbin’s romantic lead, and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt*, in which he plays a man who strangles women for their money. He had come to Hollywood from Broadway, in particular from his success playing opposite Katharine Hepburn onstage in *The Philadelphia Story*. His movie debut was auspicious—playing Orson Welles’s best friend in *Citizen Kane*. From *Kane* to his banner 1943 year, he made only three other movies: *Lydia*, *The Magnificent Ambersons*, and *Journey into Fear*.

* He had also appeared in dramas like *Pilot No. 5* (1943) and *Cross of Lorraine* (1944).

* Plunkett said of her, “She was a great big beautiful baby doll with a pretty voice, and I think at this stage, she no longer cared very much about her career.” He described how she brought large picnic hampers loaded with food and champagne to the set and shared with everyone.

* The hats are all pretty crazy, in fact. One is like an upside-down wastebasket with four inches of fur on the top. She wears a fringed suit, and the fringe hits her in the wrong place around her middle. She is being sabotaged, but by whom or what—her studio? her hairdresser? her wardrobe designer? or her own need to be grown up, no matter what it cost her? All of the above, no doubt. Durbin was seldom well dressed in her mature movies, even though she was given top designers. Perhaps she just didn’t wear clothes well. She isn’t heavy, really, but she has a full figure of the sort not common to leading ladies of the era. She is also full-faced, a problem for both hairstyles and the obligatory hats of the day. Her worst costumes are in *Lady on a Train*.

* Interestingly, one fan magazine carried a statement by Durbin regarding Judy Garland at this time: “I see that Judy Garland has announced that she is expecting, too. It is amazing how our careers have paralleled. We both started in pictures as singers, while we were early teenagers. Both were married and divorced, married again, and now we’re to become mothers. I hope she is as happy and contented as I am.” Alas, she *was* just about that happy and contented.

* Type also replicated itself. Studios ran strings of types successfully, discarding each one in turn as she aged or lost popularity. Anita Page led to Alice Faye who led to Betty Grable who led to June Haver who led to Sheree North who led to Marilyn Monroe. These women are not cookie cutters—each has her own distinctive quality—but they’re all sexy blondes who can sing and dance a bit. Fox even tried a redheaded version of this type: Vivian Blaine, who said, “I was to be the new Alice Faye ... [Fox] didn’t develop *my* personality. My own real self was, in time, completely lost.” Blaine went to Broadway and found success as the original Adelaide in *Guys and Dolls*, later repeating the role in movies.

† Considered a minor movie star in her day, by today’s standards, Scott is a major player. She has survived because of her numerous appearances in dark little crime movies that are now called film noir. She’s seen in such movies as *Pitfall* (1948), *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), and *Desert Fury* (1947). The majority of Bacall’s films are also still revived, as she has had a really distinguished career. For Lake, the main movie known today is Preston Sturges’s wonderful *Sullivan’s Travels* (1942), for which both he and she have earned immortality. Guild started out as a noir seductress in *Somewhere in the Night* (1946), didn’t click, and was soon lurking around, useless, in musicals like *Give My Regards to Broadway* (1948). She’s totally forgotten today.

‡ Clark was good and had a solid career, but he was never John Garfield, even though when Garfield died, Clark fully inherited the tough-guy-that-society-hurt mantle. Unfortunately for him, the new male of the 1950s was the more sensitive and feminine kind of hurt guy, the Montgomery Clifts, the James Deans.

* Hollywood’s other female quitters, Greta Garbo and Deanna Durbin, were different. Garbo, famously called “the recluse about town,” was willing to return if the right property could have been found. Durbin, as has been described, was a young girl who became a star before she understood what she was getting into. (When she figured it out, she was gone, never to be seen again.) Two other stars who “left” were Kim Novak, whose departure came after her career had died down, and Alice Faye, who quit movies to be a wife and mother but continued on radio and returned to performing later in life.

* This article is one of my favorite Arthur “spins.” Published in *Screenland* in June 1939, it carefully explains why Arthur “is a terrifically high-strung, nervous creature”: *She has her reasons*. The interviewer explains that Arthur’s little kitty cat was ill, and Arthur lamented, “Poor Cricket had an awfully tough life before she met me. She had too many kittens ... and she’s so young.”

† “She just needed her ego boosted,” said her frequent co-star Joel McCrea. “It was surprising, because everybody just loved her voice, they loved her, she looked great and she was good.”

* Capra brought out the best in Arthur. I witnessed a reunion between them in the late 1960s, after two decades of their not being in touch. The look of mutual delight on both their faces was obvious. She entered the room looking tense and frightened, saw Capra, and became Jean Arthur.

† Arthur has one of the most disputed of star birthdates. Sources also say 1900, 1901, or 1909.

‡ *Cameo Kirby* was Arthur’s first screen role. A two-reel comedy that she would make next, entitled *Somebody Lied*, was actually released to the public seven days prior to *Cameo Kirby* and thus is sometimes listed as her first film.

* These films were *Warming Up* (1928), *Brotherly Love* (1928), and *Sins of the Fathers* (1929). “Synch-sound” movies had sound effects (such as the sound of a bat slamming a ball), musical scores, and an occasional line of dialogue. They are not full dialogue movies.

* Although *Lysistrata* is usually thought to be Arthur’s official stage debut, she had appeared earlier in *Spring Song* at the Pasadena Playhouse.

† Ross was a graduate of Princeton who soon gave up acting to become a producer. Not all sources indicate the couple met on *Young Eagles*, because Ross was also in *Saturday Night Kid* in 1929. However, both Arthur and Ross indicated that it was on the set of *Eagles* that they began spending time together and became close. They would divorce in 1949.

* In early October 1932, after she appeared in a play called *The Man Who Reclaimed His Head* (twenty-eight performances), Arthur had also made a brief trip back to California. No one is clear what prompted her decision. Some sources say she was approached by RKO and returned to resume her film career. The facts are that, while there, she made a lackluster film, *The Past of Mary Holmes*, for RKO, and it was released in April 1933. After shooting it, she went back to New York. This period of her life is further clouded because Arthur shot a film for the low-budget Regent Pictures before she “quit” in January 1931, and that film, entitled *Get That Venus*, was not released until mid-1933. (To add to the chaos, some sources say *Get That Venus* received no theatrical release of any kind.)

* *If You Could Only Cook*, seen today, comes the closest. Arthur plays a homeless blonde who teams up with an automobile tycoon to become a gangster’s cook and butler. She’s delightful in just the type of comedy that’s right for her, but *The New York Times* review

said she couldn't "lend the sparkle" that the role required and that her voice carried "an irritating shrillness." (*Variety*, however, called her a "standout.")

† Capra often talked to me about how he and Ford discussed Arthur's talent, her special qualities, and her charm. Both men felt she could become a great movie star, but agreed she wasn't there yet with *The Whole Town's Talking*.

‡ Arthur's hair had been many colors, from red to white blond to ash blond to dark brown and black. Capra found the right shade.

* Prior to *The Impatient Years*, she starred for her husband's production company in a 1943 RKO release, *The Lady Takes a Chance*, co-starring John Wayne.

† Arthur's replacement was, of course, the delightful Judy Holliday, who made the role of Billie Dawn her own, ultimately winning an Oscar for the film version.

* Her co-star in *First Monday* was Melvyn Douglas. Later, the play would be done successfully with Henry Fonda and Jane Alexander in the Douglas and Arthur roles.

**DISENTANGLEMENT:
LORETTA YOUNG, IRENE DUNNE,
NORMA SHEARER**

It was tough for a woman to last. Those who ran the studios and operated the star machine knew only too well that the beautiful female stars they were manufacturing were going to lose popularity sooner than the males. Glamorous women were a fragile product. It is startling to realize how few actresses could achieve career longevity considering that there were so many big-name female stars in the old days. Stories about women needed them, and female fans hungered for them. But longevity for women was tricky. The camera was a cruel observer, and it saw *age*: wrinkles, thickness, the loss of that glistening shine of the first blush of ripe sexuality. The standards of beauty were stricter for women, and society's attitude toward romantic pairings of older women and younger men was less accepting. If a female star could last for a decade, she really paid off. If she could last for two decades, she was a phenomenal success. If she lasted longer than that, she was a miracle, and today we can call her a legend: Bette Davis, Myrna Loy, Barbara Stanwyck, Katharine Hepburn, and Joan Crawford. These women were tough, smart, determined, and they each had some special quality, some touch of rare good luck, and a set of indestructible bones. Each in her own way was a product of the machine. Davis fought it, Loy ignored it, Crawford embraced it, Hepburn was too well off personally to need it, Stanwyck grew past it, but three women who are not as well known today went through it and escaped out the other side, each one achieving a remarkable career success. Each one refused to be labeled "product," and they all had survival instincts that helped them find a solution to dealing

with the machine. One outsmarted it. One rose above it. And one married it.

LORETTA YOUNG



Loretta Young

In *McMillan & Wife*, a successful 1970s TV series starring Rock Hudson, an episode entitled “Love, Honor and Swindle” contains a wedding scene. As McMillan’s “sister” is speaking her vows, his “mother” (played by the unparalleled Mildred Natwick) weeps copiously, blurting out, “It’s just like a Loretta Young movie!” Therein lies the glory of Loretta Young, as well as her ignominy. She’s a big name, recognizable to a 1970s TV audience, and she’s associated with her own specific kind of movie, but, alas, it’s the kind that weepy old ladies love and a subject for ridicule.

This is sad for the exquisitely beautiful Loretta Young, and very unfair. She was one of the biggest stars in Hollywood, but today, more than thirty years after *McMillan*, her name is barely known to young people, who, if they are aware of her at all, know her only for her annual Christmas appearance in the whimsical *The Bishop's Wife*, which they're willing to watch because Cary Grant is in it. Young was never given the tributes that many of her contemporaries earned. She had no Kennedy Center Honors, no honorary Oscars, no Lincoln Center tributes, no American Film Institute Life Achievement awards. There were no Loretta Young festivals being mounted internationally, with the star in fur-clad attendance, sweeping in for extensive ovations and chic career "persona" evaluations in the *New York Times*. Young's name is never included when the list of female Hollywood icons is trotted out: Crawford, Davis, Stanwyck, Garbo, Garland, Dietrich. Nor is she even placed among the second tier, along with Ginger Rogers or Olivia de Havilland or their younger equivalents, Doris Day and Elizabeth Taylor.

Why was Young overlooked in the great stampede to honor former Hollywood greats? Her varied career deserves respect for her incredible longevity and for her shrewd ability to get her way within the system. She began working in movies as a child, when she was barely four years old. Born as Gretchen Young on January 6, 1913,* she is said to have debuted (uncredited) in the 1917 film *Primrose King*. Her first lead came in 1928, when she was fifteen, and Lon Chaney personally chose her to play opposite him in *Laugh, Clown, Laugh*. (When asked in later years why she thought Chaney chose her, Young remembered, "He said it was my sad smile.") Possessing a melodious speaking voice as well as ethereal beauty, Young easily made the transition to sound.† She worked steadily throughout the 1930s, the 1940s, and the early 1950s, winning an Oscar in 1947, and making her last feature film, *It Happens Every Thursday*, in 1953. In that year, on September 30, she debuted on NBC in the weekly TV series she and her then husband (Tom Lewis) co-created, *Letter to Loretta*, which became *The Loretta Young Show* in

1954, *The Loretta Young Theatre* in reruns in 1960, and *The New Loretta Young Show* in 1962. She became a top-rated star on TV for eleven years, from 1953 to 1964, winning three Emmys as Best Actress (in 1954, 1956, and 1959), and remarkably coming out of retirement in 1987 to win another for her leading performance in a made-for-television movie, *Christmas Eve*. And then she played another lead in a TV movie, *Lady in the Corner*, in 1989. She narrated documentaries made by her son, Christopher Lewis, and in 1994, when she was a youthful eighty-one years old, she narrated TV's *Life in the Mississippi*. Thus, if Young is given her due, she was a working professional actress from 1917 to 1994—an astonishing and record-breaking seventy-seven years! And her career never dwindled into supporting roles. Loretta Young was not a minor star. She was one of Hollywood's most famous names from 1928 to 1953 and a top-ranked television star for another ten. This is amazing longevity, and for forty years she called her own shots.

How did she do it? Loretta Young was a pioneer career woman who took charge of her own image. Backed up by her equally intelligent and business-savvy mother, she fought hard for better roles even in the earliest years of her career. She studied every aspect of filmmaking, asking serious questions about lighting and camera angles, making herself the master of her own makeup and costuming. She was stubborn—never agreeing to any hat, outfit, or hairstyle she felt did not show her to her best advantage. When one of her sisters appeared on-screen wearing an unflattering hairdo that had been highly recommended by the hairdresser, Young told her never to let that happen again. “If you don’t know more than your hairstylist,” she snapped, “you don’t deserve to have one.”

Originally under contract to Warner Bros./First National, Young was taken along to 20th Century Pictures by Darryl Zanuck in 1933, when he left Warners. After 20th Century merged with Fox to become 20th Century–Fox (in 1935) and Zanuck was put in charge, Young once again accompanied him. She was famous for pressuring him constantly not to cast her only as a beauty or a clotheshorse, and was known to make Zanuck pay for any slight she imagined came her way, exacting her small, but meaningful to her, revenges.

Assigned to a minor role (although technically the female lead) in *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* (1939), Young tried to get out of it. Failing, she played Bell's deaf wife with everything she had and stole every scene she was in, mutely gazing out of the frame adoringly or pityingly or angrily or in whatever way she could think of, using her large and expressive eyes. No one in the audience noticed anything but her, and inventing the telephone seemed the least Bell could do to make himself worthy. As further payback, Young also forced Zanuck to cast her three real-life sisters in the roles of her on-screen siblings.* When she was given another small role as the Countess Eugenie opposite Tyrone Power in *Suez*, she was not fooled by its being listed as the "technical" female lead. By her own admission, she cajoled the costume designer to create spectacular period dresses for her *Suez* wardrobe, saying, "I had the hoop skirts made twice as wide as they should be ... it was the only way to get noticed, you see." (Her skirts are wider than the canal, rivaled only by those created for Norma Shearer in *Marie Antoinette*.) Always angry at what she felt was unfair treatment, she startled everyone by refusing to renew her Fox contract when it expired in 1939. She took the daring step—rare for anyone, especially a woman—of going independent. She also spoke out about why, saying that Zanuck was more interested in male stars than female, that he gave preferential treatment to other women he had under contract (with all the implications that could be attached), and that he simply didn't treat her like a *star*. (It was reported that she said, "he never once sent me a bouquet of flowers," a diva's complaint if there ever was one.)

Young's fighting the system to gain control of her own working life continued in the 1950s when she entered television at a time when the studios were warning stars that the small screen would ruin their careers. (Some of these "warnings" were out-and-out threats.) About her bold and defiant move, Young said, "I wanted to be in on this great new invention. I'd seen how mesmerized by it small children were. The powers of having your own show were enormous. Coming right into people's homes! ... I was considered a traitor in Beverly Hills ... Louis B. Mayer took it upon himself to

phone me and he said, ‘Loretta, television is considered the enemy. You’ll never make another picture, dear.’” However, Young not only saved her career through TV, she extended it and increased her visibility. Feminist film scholars have praised Ida Lupino for her relatively minor directorial career, celebrated Hepburn’s independence (which doesn’t amount to much in career terms), and given cult status to Dietrich’s androgyny, but no one has inspected Loretta Young’s nerve in fighting her bosses, going independent when she could have remained at the very top, safely under studio protection, and pioneering in television where she cast her shows, produced them, and even carried edited films to the airport to be flown to New York if she had to. You never hear about *that* Loretta Young.

In fact, what you *do* hear is what keeps everyone uninterested. She’s said to have been a perfectionist and a demanding artist—two attributes that, had she been a man, might have earned her respect, but for a woman are often the kiss of death. These qualities brought on her dread nickname, “the steel butterfly.” (She wasn’t the only one to get such a moniker; Jeanette MacDonald was “the *iron* butterfly.”) But Young wasn’t the only demanding perfectionist. After all, her Hollywood peers included Bette Davis, who fought everyone; Dietrich, who could keep a seamstress busy for three hours just perfecting a hemline; and Joan Bennett, who once mailed Hedda Hopper a dead skunk. Women who became movie stars were often people who couldn’t be pushed around, and all the big successes were demanding about their images, their work, and their wardrobes. No, it’s not the steel butterfly label. And it’s not the lifelong rumors about her unwed motherhood, either. (Young concealed for years the fact that her adopted daughter, Judy, was actually her own child by Clark Gable, a union that took place in 1935 when she was only twenty-one, Gable was a married man, and they were co-starred in *The Call of the Wild*.) No, Young’s career has gone into eclipse because she’s simply not fashionable today, and for several reasons. First, she never made any secret of being a devout Catholic, ultimately bringing it directly into her work on TV.* She also believed in good manners, a strong work ethic, and always

being a lady. (The lady thing is a real killer.) Finally, Young appeared in more than ninety movies throughout her lifetime, but she carved her long career out of almost no truly superior ones. Her filmography is highly respectable, but she has only a few that are revived today for mass audiences: the aforementioned *The Bishop's Wife* (1947), of course; her Oscar-winning role in *The Farmer's Daughter* (1947); her film both directed by and co-starring Orson Welles, *The Stranger* (1946); and another frequent Christmas revival, which she often said was her own personal favorite, *Come to the Stable* (1949). But these are not the movies that end up on "The 100 Best Films" lists, nor are they used regularly in classrooms. She *does* have a group of extremely distinguished works that are revered by scholars, in particular, Frank Borzage's *Man's Castle* (1933), which co-stars her with Spencer Tracy, as well as DeMille's *The Crusades* (1935), John Ford's *Four Men and a Prayer* (1938), Frank Capra's *Platinum Blonde* (1931), and Roland V. Lee's *Zoo in Budapest* (1933). The truth is that Loretta Young, a very glamorous movie star, had to carry the majority of her films single-handedly. (It's ironic that she could end up being mocked for her work ethic, because without it she probably would have been nowhere.) Loretta Young *toiled*.[†] Furthermore, although her magical beauty initially ensured her career, it also held her back. *She* was serious and wanted challenging roles, but with a face like hers, studio bosses just wanted to hang some furs on her, highlight her cheekbones, backlight her hair, and put her up on the screen in radiant close-up. She hated this, saying, "To be reviewed for your cheekbones in every picture becomes deadly. I wanted to be known for my acting."

Loretta Young didn't need to be "discovered." She was just there—her mom ran a boardinghouse for actors, her older sisters preceded her into films, and Lon Chaney had found her and endorsed her when she was just fifteen. By the end of the silent era, when the studios began to formalize the star machine process, she was already established and working in leading roles. She didn't need a screen test or a set of tryout roles. She *did* have to undergo the usual posing for stills, fashion layouts, and publicity plants, but

unlike the majority of the great female movie stars in the sound era, Young began her real climb to stardom somewhat outside the system. She wasn't voluptuous. She didn't have an individual voice that could be easily imitated (although her voice was lovely). She was not a movie fashion plate (although she always looked good in clothes and in real life, she *was* one).^{*} In the beginning, she was an unpolished actress, without any particular technique. Two of her early sound movies (in 1931) show what she *did* have: *I Like Your Nerve*, with Douglas Fairbanks Jr., and Frank Capra's underrated *Platinum Blonde*. She became a star because of her extraordinary beauty, particularly her large, extremely beautiful eyes. She knew how to use them expressively, but often enough all she had to do was open them wide and smile.

In *I Like Your Nerve*, when she is not yet a star, Young is billed under the title, although in larger type and above the names of the other supporting players. *I Like Your Nerve* is Douglas Fairbanks Jr.'s film. *He's* the star, stunning in well-cut clothes and possessing a dazzling smile. Young is just around to play the girl he falls for when he sees her ride by in an open car, a lacy parasol partly hiding her face. Her looks are amazing, well worthy of his. Young is stuck in a role any beautiful girl could be plugged into, a role requiring nothing but her good looks, yet she tries to make the hollow leading lady a *person*. It's obvious that she wants to be more than just a pretty face, that she's not going to settle for that. (Young, of course, lasted as a star much longer than Fairbanks.)

Seeing *Platinum Blonde* for the first time, many people today are surprised to find Young playing a rival to Jean Harlow for the little-known Robert Williams. But the surprise doesn't come from Young and Harlow being in competition but because Harlow plays a high-society lady of the type associated today with Young, and Young plays what now seems to be the Harlow role, a down-to-earth working gal, a reporter who hangs out with the boys down at the old speakeasy. (Movie typing wasn't just about how stars looked, but also about the roles they were assigned and which way the audience liked them best.) Over the years, Young's manner became more delicate and feminine, and Harlow became flashier and sexier.

They each changed “type” after *Platinum Blonde*, but Young hits her “press gal” role right. Again, she’s trying to *stretch*.

There was another quality to Young that separated her from the pack. She’s hot. And she can be low-down. *Taxi!* (1932), *Midnight Mary* (1933), *Employees’ Entrance* (1933) at Warner Bros., *Zoo in Budapest*, and *Man’s Castle* at Fox—all show the passion and not just the beauty that made her a star. In *Taxi!* she’s a waitress at Goldfarb’s Fish Grotto—and you can believe it. In *Employees’ Entrance*, she secures a job as a department store model by sleeping with the boss. And in *Midnight Mary*, she’s an out-and-out moll, a gangster’s mistress and an ex-con to boot. She’s no lady. She’s also lyrically beautiful, with a sensuality that’s palpable. She seems to have a flame burning low inside her ... and it’s always lit. (After all, the real-life seventeen-year-old Young ran off with her older co-star, Grant Withers, and got married. Her mama, however, was waiting in the doorway when she got home and demanded an immediate annulment. Young showed her mettle, standing up to her mother and refusing to obey. Within a year, however, she and Withers were divorced.)

Taxi! is one of Young’s most typical roles of this period. She’s only nineteen years old, but she’s made twenty-five movies since *Laugh, Clown, Laugh*: eight films in 1930 alone and another seven in 1931. Her *Taxi!* co-star is James Cagney, and if there’s a movie star who could steal any scene or any picture from any other movie star, it’s James Cagney, possibly the greatest of them all. Who today pictures Loretta Young as a suitable co-star for James Cagney? But she was. She was cool to his heat, and hot to his cool. By 1932, she was no amateur and she plays him smart. She never tries to top him, wisely adapting to his electricity, making herself a part of his crackle, making it work between them. She knows she can’t match his energy, so she gets inside it, concentrating on staying in there with him, thereby establishing her own ground and her equality.

There are three great scenes in *Taxi!* in which Cagney and Young are perfectly matched: their courtship at a dance hall, their wedding night, and a post-argument make-up scene. In these, Young has her work cut out for her. Cagney might have been short, but in these

early years of his own career, he is beautiful: blond, long lashed, and totally charismatic. Furthermore, he is the master of all kinds of loose, improvisational movements. In their wedding-night sequence, the new couple have taken friends to a smoky Harlem nightclub (The Cotton Pickers Club) and while dancers gyrate their hips suggestively around their table, working in pairs on the floor, Cagney has his hands all over her, and she just leans back onto him and accepts it. They whisper to each other, kissing and smiling and cuddling in the loose, bluesy atmosphere. They're openly erotic.





Loretta Young and James Cagney in *Taxi*, hot to trot on their wedding night ... and trotting a light two-step while courting.



Loretta Young was a sensu- ous and radiant co-star for Spencer Tracy in Frank Borzage's passionate story about a Depression-era couple, *Man's Castle*.



The movie presents their relationship as contentious. They constantly trade insults. “I wouldn’t go out with that dame,” says Cagney when he meets her, “if she were the last dame on earth and I just got out of the navy.” She’s always breaking up with him: “I’m tellin’ ya, we’re through,” she yells at him, and his smirking response is “Aw, give us a little kiss, will ya?” After one of these big fights, Cagney arrives outside Young’s apartment and tries out his welcome by first tossing his hat in the door. Is she still mad or can he come in? Once assured he can, he snaps right up to her doing a sharp little tap dance—a miniature musical number—wearing a big and sexually confident grin.* Young is ironing, still plenty annoyed. Cagney comes up close to her, almost letting his body touch hers, his face barely an inch away. He flirts, playfully threatens to sock

her, and finally kisses her, tilting her chin up and giving her a fake little slap. After he's defused her anger, making a joke of it, he smirks again and says, "Stay that way." Then he abandons her, sauntering off with an evil little grin. What's Loretta Young—or any actress—supposed to do in the face of all that? Cagney was one of Hollywood's most sexually dangerous men on-screen—threatening yet irresistible, dangerously impatient with women. (He is, after all, the guy who pushed a grapefruit in Mae Clark's face.) But Young has her own self-confidence. She's one of the most beautiful women in the world, so she just waits for her reactive close-up—then radiates, smolders, and gets to finish off the scene on her own terms.

The real test for Young comes in a dance hall scene. Cagney is a hoofer. Young is not. Their characters enter a dance contest, and it's important for the action to show the audience that *this* dame is the one for Cagney—if she can keep up with him. After he spins her around the floor at full speed to put her to the ultimate test—and she survives—they take a break. Casually chewing her gum, paying no real attention to him, Young pulls her sweater back down into place as if he hadn't even gotten her engine going. She holds herself still, detached, and adopts a slightly bored air of inbred confidence. He moves in for the kill, and as they take off on the dance floor again, Young relaxes her body and allows herself to be completely controlled by the sweet-stepping Cagney, keeping up with him by submitting to his physicality, making herself part of him, as if she were born in his arms. She surrenders, but again on her own terms. This is not our mothers' Loretta Young, and yet she *does* possess an underlying ladylike dignity, some sense of herself that is decent even though she is sexy, willing, and available. At the very least, there's always honesty in her fallen women. Since she was often shot with a halo behind her head and an emphasis on her expressive eyes, there is an indirect implication of purity.

But only an implication. These early pre-code movies present Loretta Young as both tough and sensual, and being pre-code, they don't have to hide the fact that she is having sex with men she's not married to. "Hey, sugar," a guy in a car calls out to "Midnight" Mary, noticing Mary (Young) and her girlfriend (Una Merkel)

hanging out on the street, heavily made up, and flirty. Young moves right toward the car with a look in her eye that says she's ready for anything, and the next scene shows her with legs already entwined around the man who called out to her as the car speeds forward. (Merkel is hanging out the front car window, obviously dead drunk.) As I say, this isn't your mother's Loretta Young. These early movies reveal that Young became a star because she was ravishingly beautiful, obviously sexy, talented enough to work with the best, and willing to give all she had to her roles.

After her pre-code years, when Young left Warner Bros./First National, she entered the middle period of her career. She played in lavish costume pictures (*Clive of India* [1935], *House of Rothschild* [1934], *Suez*, *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell*, *The Crusades*), low-budget modern stories (*Week-end Marriage* [1932]), and a series of romantic screwball comedies, three of which paired her with her partner in exquisite looks Tyrone Power.* In her costume pictures, Young was lavishly gowned and lovingly photographed. Her delicate looks made her the perfect heroine for period pieces, but she also made a perfect modern heroine decked out in furs, jewels, and ever-changing hairdos in her lighthearted comedies.

By the end of the 1930s, Loretta Young had survived silent films, the pre-code sexy era, and hoopskirts and studio assignments. She had become a top-drawer movie star, appearing in top-drawer films. She had the money, the fan mag adulation, the fame, and the respect, and she had done it without most of the star machine manipulations, slipping past the one-two-three-kick plan for manufacturing people like her. Almost any actress in Hollywood would have settled for Young's career; it was what most of them dreamed of achieving. But Young was restless, dissatisfied—not with stardom itself, which had always been a motivating goal for her, but with her form of it. She knew what it was she wanted from her stardom: She wanted more than the others had; she wanted *control*. She didn't want to walk away, like a Deanna Durbin, or get away from the crowds, like a Garbo, or just choose her own roles, like a Davis. She wanted to make *all* the decisions herself. Like her mother, Loretta Young was a smart businesswoman. The system told

her she was a product, so she figured that if her business was herself, she wanted to be the CEO.



Loretta Young (*left*) was easily cast in modern dramas, where she was svelte and chic (on the set of *Ladies in Love*, with Constance Bennett [*center*] and Janet Gaynor [*right*]) ...

And so, to everyone's surprise, Loretta Young just up and packed her bags when her contract at 20th Century-Fox expired in 1939 and went independent. She boldly and consciously broke away from the direction in which she was being taken. It was a move almost no stars made, and the ones who did were usually men. She had taken a daring step toward control, and like the good businessman she was, she had a project lined up for herself. She had formed an arrangement with an independent producer, Walter Wanger, to make her first film outside studio dominance. Unfortunately, the movie turned out to be one of her worst. If it was freedom from slight romantic screwball comedies she wanted, if it was to get away from being a clotheshorse, if it was to get out of trivial material, her first movie was a sobering failure. *Eternally Yours*, co-starring David Niven, became her last release for 1939 and her first truly awful movie. It's a silly story about a magician (Niven) whose wife

(Young) feels his devotion to his magic tricks is ruining their marriage. This is all anyone needs to know, except that Young wears a great many astonishing hats. The movie was not well received and can hardly have been what she had in mind. What was worse for her—and what probably discouraged other actresses from considering such a move—was that for almost a year, she received no other offers. Loretta Young, still young, still beautiful, and at the top of her game, was out of work for a year. Finally, Columbia Pictures rescued her, but only by offering her another silly film, *The Doctor Takes a Wife* (1940), opposite Ray Milland. Young herself summed this movie up best by saying, “I had made it many times before, believe me.”



... or in epic costume dramas, with blond wig and long gown (in Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Crusades*, with, to her right, Henry Wilcoxin).

She decided to hang tough. Furthermore, she knew that her goals were realistic and compatible with those of the movie business. She was always practical; she wasn’t mooning around, yearning to play Joan of Arc or Madame Bovary. She wanted good roles, challenges

to her talent, but what she wanted was to make commercially successful movies with what she considered to be important values, or which reflected a woman's life in a way she felt was related to her own experience as a career woman living in a family of intelligent and independent women. She didn't eschew roles as wives or mothers or women in love, but she did look for stories that could reflect something she understood about life from her own experience: Women could do things, women could be heroic. Such movies, she knew, could appeal at the box office.



In the 1930s Loretta Young and Tyrone Power were the epitome of Hollywood beauty, constantly posed together. Here they publicize *Love Is News*.

By the start of the 1940s, Loretta Young had taken two key steps toward career longevity: She took personal charge of her career, and she ignored type. She stepped completely out of the star machine process. In this regard, she was one of the smartest female movie stars. She made “giving a performance” her type, presenting her roles as “acted by Loretta Young.” During the 1940s, Loretta Young

chose to make movies like *The Lady from Cheyenne* (1941), in which she played an 1869 Wyoming schoolteacher who fights for women's rights, and *Ladies Courageous* (1944), in which she ferries bombers overseas during World War II. She's a heroic savior of Chinese war orphans in *China* (1943) and a deaf woman bravely facing experimental surgery in the soapy *And Now Tomorrow* (1944). When an opportunity to work with clever people came along, she took it, as in *The Stranger* (1946), which co-starred her with Orson Welles and Edward G. Robinson in a movie about postwar Nazis, also directed by Welles. In 1948, she undertook *Rachel and the Stranger*, pairing her with William Holden and Robert Mitchum. Beneath a somewhat conventional exterior, the story subtly questions how wives are treated as property by husbands. And, in a movie no one remembers, she played a pistol-packin' mama in an overtly feminist western, *Along Came Jones*, with Gary Cooper.



As a freelance actress, Young kept her career going by taking on a more mature look and making films, such as *China* (pictured above), that addressed current political issues.

In *Jones* (1945), she participates in a role-reversal story. Young, the lovely and ethereal beauty, plays the hero. Cooper, the westerner from the strong-and-silent-type school, plays a guy who can't shoot a gun. The film is allegedly a western and *does* contain a stagecoach robbery, shoot-outs, saloons, and horses. However, it is actually a comedy of mistaken identity, almost a French farce with changing venues and surprise twists. Cooper's character, Melody Jones, is a singing cowpoke, laid back and incompetent. He can't shoot a gun well enough to hit the broad side of a barn, and he constantly stumbles over his own feet. When he's mistaken for desperate outlaw killer Monte Jerrad because of the initials he has on his saddle, M.J., he meets Young's character, Cherry. As a youngster growing up, she had loved Jerrad and is helping him now, although she's begun to realize he's mean. ("He's changed," is a single line sensitively delivered by Young to explain everything and also exonerate her.) Young drives a horse and buggy at full speed, is a first-rate horsewoman, and is not only fast with her gun (or rifle), but also a dead-eye shot. ("Ain't she a lulu?" Cooper asks.) William Demarest (playing Cooper's acerbic partner) has a different point of view: "She's an ornery little lady skunk." (Even playing the western hero, which she surely does here, she's called a "lady.") Young saves or protects Cooper in scene after scene, and the story allows her to remain quick thinking to the very end by showing Cooper just how good a shot she really is. In the final scene, she uses her rifle to bring down the villain (Dan Duryea), dropping him with one swift shot in the forehead. (Cooper has tried to face down Duryea, and has been shot, finally sinking to his knees in the dirt.)

Considering that Loretta Young is appearing in one of the few pistol-packin' mama roles of the 1940s, and that the film, although it ends with a clinch, never suggests that her character is anything but liberated, one can only wonder why her movie career is

remembered as a bunch of nun roles. (She played exactly one nun in the movies. ^{*}) In fact, from 1940 to 1953, the end of her film career, Young played an authoress, an actress (twice), a suffragette who runs for office, a ballerina, a mystery writer's wife, a schoolteacher in China, a bomber-ferrying participant in WAFS, a deaf rich girl, an endangered wife (twice), a nurse (twice), a maid, a murderess, a widow, a mayor, a hit-and-run driver, and a wife (three times, with great variations of type). [†]



Loretta Young knew how to vary her roles. She went blonde and Swedish and won an Oscar playing opposite Joseph Cotten in *The Farmer's Daughter*.

Loretta Young wanted to be recognized by her peers, and that meant winning an Oscar. She searched endlessly for roles that might bring her the coveted recognition, but her business savvy wouldn't let her choose something that she felt could never be a commercial success. She understood the need for balance—good, meaty roles, but also good, crowd-pleasing pictures. Finally, in 1947, she found the part that would be the crowning moment of her movie stardom.

The Farmer's Daughter is a film most viewers today would like to sneer at but find they actually can't. It's droll, but charmingly so,

and Young is lovely and completely in control of her performance as Karin Holstrom, the country mouse who shapes up the city folks. Young didn't treat the movie as a minor comedy to be walked through, but studied hard for her part, which required a Swedish accent. Her coach was Ruth Roberts, the sister of director George Seaton, who had once taught English to Swedish immigrants. In fact, she had been hired by David O. Selznick to work with Ingrid Bergman on how to lose her Swedish accent. Young later said, "Ruth took away Ingrid's accent ... and gave it to me."



She also garnered an Oscar nomination by playing a nun (her only movie nun) alongside Celeste Holm in *Come to the Stable*.

No one imagined Loretta Young would win the Oscar for *The Farmer's Daughter*. Even her nomination was a shock. Things being what they are with the Oscars, no one thought she had a chance. Who would give the Oscar to a woman playing a Swedish maid in a lighthearted political comedy? Once it had happened, people wrote it off as a reward for her long and distinguished career, and also for her being a good citizen in Hollywood. Her competition included strong performances: Joan Crawford in *Possessed*, Susan Hayward for *Smash-up: The Story of a Woman*, Dorothy McGuire in *Gentleman's*

Agreement, and Young's close friend Rosalind Russell in the movie adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, a candidate for the worst movie ever made. Everyone assumed Russell was a shoo-in with her serious literary entry (and as good a performance as anyone could muster in the material). Thus, it was that a stunned audience watched an equally stunned Loretta Young mount the stage to accept the award. She made Oscar history out of her moment, giving a speech that managed to be both graceful and flustered—a speech that is always included in Academy clips. Stepping up to accept, she said, “The Academy Awards has always been a spectator sport for me, but tonight”—here she referred to her magnificently ruffled, showstopping gown designed especially for her by Adrian—“I dressed for the stage, just in case!” While the audience erupted in applause and laughter, she added, speaking to her statue, “And as for you, at long last!” She kissed the award, added “Good night and God bless you,” and swept out magnificently, as a movie star should.

With her Oscar, Young had proved herself. Although she could choose her own scripts, a rare thing for any star, particularly an actress, good roles were hard to come by for a woman who had been around a long time. One of the last big movies Loretta Young made was in 1950, just before she turned her attention to television. A comedy, *Key to the City*, paired her with Clark Gable for the second time. Young was approaching forty, which in those days meant trouble for female stars. She looks fabulous, slim and youthful, but by now she's no “Midnight Mary.” She's prim, proper, and dressed in button-up blouses, coy little hats, white gloves, and straight-lined suits. No low necklines. No clinging velvet. No loose straps falling off a shoulder. She's Mayor Standish of Winona, Maine, a woman who's frugal, practical, and takes no nonsense from any man, an out-and-out New England spinster who went to law school at Harvard (Loretta Young plays Katharine Hepburn). At this point in her career, she has developed the habit of smiling big, flashing her teeth, and making sure audiences appreciate her lovely apple cheeks. Whereas she seemed in her early years to rely on what she knew people actually felt in life, and to let her eyes and her

beauty carry her, now she's more technique and less raw response. Where once she was all melting eyes, sensuous mouth, and dreamy sexuality, now she's tight and reflects tension. She's a good-looking woman, but no one a cruising driver would call out, "Hey, sugar," to.*



One of Loretta Young's most enduring roles is in a movie seen every Christmas, *The Bishop's Wife*, with David Niven (*center*) as her bishop, and Cary Grant (*left*) as the kind of angel every woman wants to have turn up for the holidays.

Throughout the movie, even when she beats up on Marilyn Maxwell in the final scene, Young is all manners and careful diction. No matter what happens, she remains dignified. Even when she's given a speech full of double entendres, she plays it with embarrassment and a sense that this just isn't proper. And beautiful as she is, she now looks as if she has a reputation to maintain, not just in her film role but in her offscreen persona, too. Soon she would indeed be playing the grand lady as she swirled through her television doors and into the living rooms of America.

Finally, Young went into what would be her final film, 1953's *It Happens Every Thursday*, about a couple who buy a small-town newspaper and struggle to make it click. Never confused about script quality, Young said, "It was a big nothing." She saw the handwriting on the movie screen. Wasting no time, she immediately began her amazingly successful television career.

It was television that made a lady out of Loretta Young. She not only played nuns and ladies but also overtly presented herself as *herself*, twirling through the French doors to greet her audiences.[†] "I am a lady," those entrances said, "but in my little performances I am going to pretend to be otherwise for you in order to make you happy." She also spoke little homilies in hushed tones for each week's show.[‡] She was that dreaded female self-aggrandizer: the hostess with the mostest, a decorous grande dame in a grand house with the outfits to prove it. Off-camera publicity emphasized the idea of Loretta Young, Lady Star. It seldom mentioned that she was working her butt off behind the scenes to produce, act in, and promote the show.

Loretta Young never gave up. She had real show business guts. She fought, kept going, worked hard, and slowly piled up her longevity without anyone's really noticing it. She quietly became a complete professional, and she had a strong family life backed up by solid religious belief. She was well grounded outside the insanity of movie stardom.



Loretta Young

As she aged, she never lost her beauty.* As a young woman, she was all eyes, prominent cheekbones, and smiling teeth. As an older woman, she was exactly the same. She never thickened, either in her face or her body, and looking at her is never anything but a treat. Her last official photo shoot was for *Vanity Fair* magazine in 1999.† She was eighty-six years old, and she stared directly, calmly, into the camera in a close-up that is as close as you can get. (She had learned long before that she had nothing to fear from any camera.) She had remained a star because she was willing to work very hard. No matter what happened, she stayed in the game. “If there is any difference between me and another woman my age,” she said in the 1970s, “it’s just that I’ve worked harder and longer and with more concentration.” About her life, she said, “The way I see it, God has been very, very good to me.” No one can argue with that. To her credit, she lived her personal life—a fair mess in many ways—with privacy and dignity. Hers was a true longevity—always at the top, always lovely, always knowing what she wanted and how

to get it. She found a way to escape the restrictions of the star system by making herself the owner of the machine's product—herself. And there can be no doubt but that she understood what she was doing. Considering the confused lives of so many of her contemporaries, perhaps the most revealing statement she ever made was this: “I know now when I’m Loretta and when I’m Gretchen.”

In the end, Loretta Young outsmarted the star machine.

YOUNG'S CAREER CAN BE interestingly compared to two other top-ranked actresses of her generation: Irene Dunne and Norma Shearer. Although neither Young nor Dunne was ever ranked in the top ten box office draws from the dubious Motion Picture Exhibitor's Poll, they were unquestionably front-ranked movie stars. Shearer was on the top ten list from 1931 to 1934, an impressive record at a time when her female competition was strong.* All three women had vehicles built especially for them, and all were given serious recognition as actresses. Both Young and Shearer won Oscars, and Irene Dunne, the most versatile of them all, had five nominations. (It's an Oscar crime that she never won.†)

These women were peers in the studio system of the 1930s, and they faced similar problems: how to handle the typecasting, how to win the roles they wanted, how to stay on top as they aged, how to survive as the business that had nourished them began to collapse, and whether to embrace the idea of longevity and fight for it, or just fold their tents and steal away. Each made a different decision. Young, the consummate careerist, hung on and triumphed. Shearer chose to retire and disappear. Dunne, like Shearer, chose to retire, but she didn't disappear. She continued her public life as a private citizen in political affairs, serving at the United Nations and becoming widely respected for her charitable works.

Norma Shearer is probably the most overlooked and forgotten of the three today, and Irene Dunne the best known. (Given her absolutely delightful personality on film, it's a crime that she's not

better known.) This is due largely to Dunne's famous and often-revived screwball comedy opposite Cary Grant, *The Awful Truth* (1937), and her appearances in two adapted stage plays, *I Remember Mama* (1948) and *Life with Father* (1947). She also has a role in the Astaire-Rogers musical *Roberta* (1935), and made two movies that all in-the-know fans and scholars love: the 1936 version of *Show Boat* and the beautiful 1939 *Love Affair*.

IRENE DUNNE



Irene Dunne

Irene Dunne, born in 1898,^{*} was fifteen years older than Loretta Young. (The two women were friends, sharing a deep Catholic faith.) Dunne's original career goal had been to sing with the Metropolitan Opera. She had a well-trained voice, but it was lighter

than required for grand opera, so she began appearing in musicals, making her Broadway debut in 1922 in *The Clinging Vine*. She played only a bit part but also understudied the leading lady. After seven years of solid employment, she was cast in the leading role of Magnolia in the 1929 road company of *Show Boat*. During her tour she was spotted by a talent scout from RKO who made an offer that brought her to Hollywood. Her first movie was *Leathernecking*, which was released in 1930, when she was thirty-two years old. Since she was a mature woman when she began her film career, and a reasonably established theatre person, she was able to avoid the early stages of the star machine process. Dunne debuted as a leading lady in her very first film—and was still a leading lady in her last, *It Grows on Trees*, in 1952, after twenty-two years of stardom.

Irene Dunne was an anomaly: a movie star only because she starred in movies. Not only did she not need the machine to become a success, she didn't need it to remain one. She turned her back on the entire process of hype, publicity, fake bios, and cheesecake photos. As a result, the process didn't have much choice but to leave her alone and accept her as she was. In the beginning, of course, when she first came on the scene, Hollywood created its usual series of silly press releases: "Irene Dunne likes to eat hard-boiled eggs dipped in vinegar ... She's depressed by handsome men ... She doesn't drink and smokes only in mixed company ... She won first prize in a dahlia show [doing what isn't mentioned]." After these first abortive attempts to generate excitement about her went nowhere, the system tried another tactic. The October 1932 issue of *New Movie* carried an article sensibly entitled "The Girl Nobody Knows." (Dunne had been in the movies for three years by that time, and no pattern to publicize her had successfully emerged.) In the end, "The Girl Nobody Knows" can't make its own point. It tries to work from true facts (Dunne's from Louisville and was on the Broadway stage), but can't stop itself from whipping up the false pizzazz associated with promoting a movie star: "She has a terrible temper and controls herself by reading a book." In a final desperate attempt to do something—anything—with Irene Dunne, the article says she's a great golfer, a member of the "hole-in-one" club who

“often” has to replace her golf clubs because “she breaks them if she shoots a poor round.”

The star machine’s last attempt to make colorful copy out of Irene Dunne was personal. Publicists tried to create hot copy out of her marital situation. (She married Dr. Frank Griffin, a dentist, in 1928. Twelve years her senior, he would be her one and only husband.) When Dunne had first wed, she kept it to herself (“Irene’s Secret Marriage”). Later, when she came to Hollywood, her husband stayed behind to continue his dental practice. (“Parted but Happily Married.”) When they chose to remain living on separate coasts, the fan mags smelled something good to work with (“What’s the True Story About Dunne?”), but they were soon foiled when the couple changed their minds and Dr. Griffin closed his practice and moved west. If there was anything Hollywood couldn’t understand, it was a happy marriage. The business found the Griffins to be mysterious—even suspicious—and they sniffed around so much that Dr. Griffin finally issued a formal statement, silencing the publicity machine for the rest of their lives: “I’m behind her all the time in everything she does. She cooperates with me as well and we both work together.” It was a plain statement that might describe any happy marriage, but it left the natives stunned.

By the mid-1930s, Dunne felt the need to short-circuit attempts to publicize her falsely. She avoided talking about herself whenever possible, and as James Robert Parish described it, became “charmingly vague” if forced to answer reporters’ questions. She’d give a perfect Irene Dunne performance, dithering a bit, pretending not to understand, clicking her tongue against her teeth, and heading toward the door as rapidly as possible. Ultimately she undertook a stance: She would undercut the publicists if they weren’t honest. While in New York for the premiere of the 1936 *Show Boat*, a reporter who’d read the movie press kit asked her to elaborate on the story of how she’d entertained on a show boat as a child and how her lawyer father had disapproved of her entry into movies, having hoped she’d become a barrister herself. Dunne spoke right up, saying she remembered *seeing* show boats on the river when she was a kid in Ohio, but that she’d never even been on one,

much less performed there. And as for her father, well, in the first place he wasn't a lawyer, and in the second place, both her parents had encouraged her to become an opera singer. And were there any more questions?

Perhaps the business's final surrender to Irene Dunne about creating fake publicity appeared later that same year in *Photoplay*. The author, Sara Hamilton, called her story "This Is Really Irene Dunne." For once, a movie magazine admits the truth. Hamilton tells her readers that she can personally "guarantee no juicy bits of intimate gossip, for I know of none. Unless perhaps she lies awake nights heartsick about the kitchen sink in her new home: she's afraid it's too near the door. Would you all call that juicy? No? No, I thought not." Hollywood had officially given up on Irene Dunne in the publicity flack department.*

Irene Dunne was too popular a star to be left out of the magazines entirely, of course. What happened was that the magazines settled down into promoting Dunne in a way that was both suitable for her and acceptable to her. Her "publicity" in the fan mags was done in four basic ways that were appropriately professional:

1. In the Women's sections. Dunne posed for fashion layouts, usually costumes from her own films, as in a 1936 *Modern Screen*, which presents her in Hattie Carnegie's designs for *Magnificent Obsession* (1935) or a 1938 *Screenland*, in which she models her hats from *Joy of Living* (1938). Dunne also "authored" an advice column for women and gave out the usual "star recipes," which are always horrifying. (Dunne's included a ham casserole and a coconut chiffon cake.)
2. In advertisements for her films and "plants" about them. Dunne was not uncooperative about her career—quite the opposite—she just didn't want nonsense written about her. Ads for her movies, as well as product endorsements, stills, and snapshots, were thought by her to be part of the job. She didn't object to little "plants" about her work: "Irene Dunne got dunked for her swimming pool scene in *My Favorite Wife* [1940]" or "*Roberta*,

with Irene Dunne, is filming now and is progressing nicely—soon to be in your neighborhood theatre,” et cetera. Dunne also did the usual posing for product ads, such as Elizabeth Arden makeup (“Note Irene Dunne and her Beauty Within While Wearing Elizabeth Arden”).

3. Irene Dunne Griffin and her husband were popular in Hollywood, and they were often seen together at premieres and parties. Dunne considered such outings to be part of her professional responsibilities, and she allowed herself and her husband to be photographed together in full dress for the magazines. She always looks radiant and beautifully gowned. He always looks content to be at her side or slightly in the background.
4. Since Irene Dunne *was* a star, it *was* necessary to keep her name and face “out there.” Her public wanted it that way. There *were* Irene Dunne stories in the magazines, just very few of them, considering the level of her success. The stories that do appear are revealing. Their titles say clearly how Irene Dunne was perceived: “Dignified,” “My Husband Is My Best Friend,” “How I Stay Normal in Hollywood,” “Irene Dunne Has Charm and Beauty,” “Found: One Happy Actress,” and, inevitably, “Lady Irene.”

It is to Irene Dunne’s credit that she alone could be called a “lady” behind the scenes in Hollywood without it being an insult. “Lady” was the insider’s code word for “bitch” or “boring” or “takes herself too seriously.” When Hollywood applied it to Irene Dunne, the word meant what it was supposed to mean: She was a lady. It was her triumph over a system that she bent to her own standards of behavior.*

On film, Dunne was a versatile triple threat in musicals, comedies, and tragedies. She was a good singer, her comedic timing was perfect, and her ability to lighten dramas that might have sagged under their own weight is remarkable. Weepies starring Dunne lift and float, making us feel the real tragedies they embody. In the same way, stupid comedies that should have been laying an

egg would start to bounce when she turned up. She didn't have to "grow up" to play serious roles, and she never got stuck in lavishly produced literary projects. She didn't "progress" from one kind of film to another—she just maintained quality in whatever she was assigned. This was the type of career that it was almost impossible to have in Hollywood's studio system, especially for a woman. The business understood that she needed no help, just good casting. Furthermore, Dunne had her husband at her side to advise her, and he and her brother were sharp businessmen. In the mid-1930s they had helped guide her to the acceptance of a "multi-allegiance" system, inaugurated by Claudette Colbert (and adopted by Carole Lombard), in which an actress signed an agreement to do three pictures a year, one each with three studios (Columbia, Paramount, and RKO, in her case). Like Young, Dunne also daringly went freelance in 1940. Thus, both women were in the same place by 1940. Each had become independent—and each had found a way to define herself without a machine-like typecasting process. Young had made *herself* into her type, and Dunne made versatility hers.

Dunne had something else that required no machine manipulations. Like Shearer and Young, she was a glamorously turned-out woman in any movie in which having a wardrobe suited her character. However, as the July 1942 issue of *Modern Screen* pointed out, she wasn't *just* about glamour. Dunne has "an edge," the magazine says, because unlike "the rest of the girls, she refuses to go gaga over glamour. She's just a simple gal with a gorgeousness rated at \$500,000 per picture." Also unlike Shearer and Young, Dunne did not have a pre-code period in which she played gangster's molls or obvious prostitutes. She might sacrifice all for the love of a married man, becoming his mistress and sitting around painting plates while waiting for his visits, as in *Back Street* (1932). Or she might be abandoned by a feckless husband who commits suicide, or she might, after losing her son to his wealthy parents, have to open a bordello to make a living (*The Secret of Madame Blanche*, 1933). Or, as in *Ann Vickers* (1933), she might misjudge the character of the young man who sweeps her off her feet at a country club dance and end up an unwed mother. But Dunne's early years in

desperate women's film plots were never smarmy. She was more often presented as a symbol of womanly decency. In her 1935 musical *Sweet Adeline*, in which she beautifully sings "Don't Ever Leave Me" (the Helen Morgan hit), she is dressed in yards of white organza, ruffled and tied with satin bows, to play up her "innocence." Dunne, however, stood aside from priggishness and was never a symbol of virginity. She portrayed decent women making their way as the fates would allow.



Dunne entered films as a leading lady, as seen in two of her early efforts: *Cimarron*, with Richard Dix (*above*); *The Great Lover*, with Adolphe Menjou.



Helen Morgan as Julie, Hattie McDaniel as Queenie, and Irene Dunne as Magnolia in one of the greatest musicals ever made, the 1936 version of *Show Boat*.

Irene Dunne is mostly appreciated by modern audiences because of her skill in comedy. She's the female Cary Grant. She's always a

bit bemused by the movie world around her, and although she shows how her characters feel, she also seems to be holding something valuable back. We can see she has an opinion—she communicates that directly as if, like us, she’s just an observer of the movie event. (Grant did the same. They were masters at establishing rapport with audiences first and their co-stars second, yet no actors ever reacted better to others or played to their casts better. Grant and Dunne are magical but never fey.) This “to the side of things” quality allowed Irene Dunne to really kick up her heels in the 1930s filmed screwball world. Watching her get even with an unfaithful husband (Grant) by putting him through her comedy wringer in *The Awful Truth* (1937) is pure joy. And watching Grant give it back to her—all under the umbrella of what we accept as true love between them—shows why her performance was nominated for the Oscar, one of the few times a woman in a lighthearted comedy has ever been chosen.* Dunne said, “The best way to be funny is to be cold-blooded and purely mental about it. It demands more timing, pace, shading, and subtlety of emphasis. It is difficult to learn, but once it is acquired can be easily slowed down and becomes an excellent foundation for dramatic acting.”



Irene Dunne and Cary Grant make new rules about how to play a married couple in the screwball comedy *The Awful Truth*.

Irene Dunne was a masterful comedienne, possibly the very best of her era. She could sail through the frequently messy screwball universe like a duck through water—a well-dressed duck, even a well-behaved duck—until the moment came when she had to go crazy to set things straight. When she dresses up in cheap clothes and pretends to be her ex-husband's sister in *The Awful Truth*, she steals the movie. (Not so easy to do when your co-star is Cary Grant, but he's obviously letting her do it and loving it.) Suddenly missing her purse, she snaps out a command to Grant's ritzy (and prissy) future in-laws: "*Don't nobody leave this room.*" In *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936), her first starring comedy, she's a proper small-town girl who quietly writes sexy best-selling novels. She stays proper and well behaved until Melvyn Douglas makes it his job to "liberate" her from her oppressive family but ditches her when she gets serious. She follows him to the city to turn the tables on him and wreck his life. Leaving her little hats and Peter Pan collars behind in Lynnvile (population 4,426), she turns up in furs and feathers, plunging necklines, sparkling jackets—and a little crystal butterfly in her hair. Soon Douglas is in her arms and under her control.

Dunne could unite her comic, musical, and tragic skills into one role, as we see in a minor (but excellent) movie, *Unfinished Business*, directed by Gregory La Cava in 1941. It is half-comedy, half-tragedy, and throws in a musical number. Dunne plays a small-town girl from Messina, Ohio (this time population 4,750). As she watches her baby sister get married, she contemplates her own sad life: getting older, no prospects, living with an oppressive family. She decides to listen to "those train whistles" that have been luring her to leave town all her life. She tells her family, all of whom have plans for her, that she would like "to live first ... I want to walk on the fringe." (Her local beau, played by stodgy Dick Foran, intones, "You'll fall off.") And fall off she does. On the very train that takes her to New York City, she meets a bounder (Preston Foster) who

picks her up on his cruise through the cars looking for something to relieve his boredom.

No punches are pulled in this film. It's made clear that Irene Dunne has been seduced. The next morning, Foster is met by his business entourage, and Dunne waits timidly off to the side. He plans to leave without speaking to her but gets trapped. He tells her he'll "call her," and when she shyly, sweetly says, "I love you," to him, it's pathetic. She has come to the city hoping to become a famous opera singer, but quickly finds out two things: She is untrained and cannot compete, and Foster is never going to call. She clips pictures of him out of the newspaper society pages, even though a female friend tells her, "He's a wolf! Notorious! You could draw a number out of a hat and get a nicer fella than he is."

Needing to make a living, Dunne becomes a singing telephone operator in a nightclub and then in comes the wolf's brother (Robert Montgomery). He's a drunk whose main job is fighting off the breach-of-promise suits his behavior generates. Foster's marriage announcement appears in the paper, and on Foster's wedding night, Dunne and Montgomery get together, becoming very drunk and slightly married without Montgomery knowing about the train tryst between his bride and his brother.

It all ends swell, of course, with some hilarious lines and solid comedy, but marked by pathos, too. It is Irene Dunne's ability that makes it work. Her heartbreak and her naïve mistake in trusting Foster are tragically real, but her ability to deliver hilarious and sophisticated dialogue with great comedy timing keeps the movie out of the doldrums. (And she can sing!) When Irene Dunne tries to explain to Montgomery about what happened to her, she says, "There are lots of women like me ... in the lives of all women there's some unfinished business." She is credible, sympathetic, hilarious, and a *realistic* "fallen woman." In the end, she doesn't die. She doesn't lose her rich husband. She doesn't have to go back to Ohio. She sins and she wins. It took Irene Dunne to get away with that. (Irene Dunne is Doris Day before Doris Day was Doris Day.)

This ability to be both sinful and funny also showed itself in *Together Again* (1944). Dunne and Charles Boyer, two actors not

afraid to play grown-ups, are brought together by one of those fortuitous Hollywood comedy-plot events—lightning strikes a statue of small-town mayor Dunne's late husband, knocking its head off. (Her father-in-law, Charles Coburn, takes this as a good omen.) Her husband and his entire family have been so important to the town's history that everyone thinks a new, even bigger statue should be made, and they send Mayor Dunne to the big city to employ sculptor Boyer. ("She'll slip," her main enemy intones. "Women always do.")



Charles Boyer and Irene Dunne in the 1940s as a mismatched couple in *Together Again*, which was billed as “a gay comedy.” He’s a freewheeling artist and she’s a straitlaced small-town mayor. The inevitable occurs.

Together Again illustrates how vehicles were built for stars like Dunne and Boyer. By this time in their careers, they are harmonious in age, grace, and style. They have successfully co-starred before. The audience expects them to get together—they’ve seen them do it before. They believe it will work—it did before. For this plot, the

subtle shading will be Dunne's having to be coaxed out of a prudish sense of duty, and Boyer's having to be hooked into marriage. If an actor associated with caddish behavior, say a French version of George Sanders, or an actress who didn't have a ladylike demeanor, say a Joan Blondell, had played these roles, the plot wouldn't have worked. Or if the characters were too young or too old, this little vehicle, made for peanuts and easily sold to fans of the stars, wouldn't have brought its money back the easy way it did.

Without the star machine process, Dunne had still located her type. She not only gracefully sidestepped the machine, she also avoided the aging process. When the decade turned over from the 1930s to the 1940s, most of her contemporaries faced casting problems. Since she was in charge of her own career choices, she opened up the decade by playing a mother with two children in a solid comedy co-starring Cary Grant, *My Favorite Wife*. In her next movie, the superb *Penny Serenade* (1941), she was again paired with Grant and "aged" from youth to adoptive motherhood in a story about a normal woman's family life. Both these films cast her in ways that avoided the age issue, although her next two, *Unfinished Business* and the fairly horrible *Lady in a Jam* (1942), put her in the "young" romantic lead. *Business* was too good to matter, but *Lady* was a throwback to her old screwball days, casting her as a wacky heiress in the madcap tradition. Except for *Never a Dull Moment* in 1950 (where she's a songwriter who falls for a cowboy), *Lady* was the last time Dunne allowed herself to be cast younger than she was.* After that, she did not put a foot wrong, playing such roles as a mature novelist and screenwriter in *Over 21* (1945); mothers in *Life with Father* (1947), *I Remember Mama* (1948), *Anna and the King of Siam* (1946), and *It Grows on Trees* (1952); and Queen Victoria in *The Mudlark* (1950), nobody's idea of a sex goddess. Dunne never let herself appear on-screen as a pathetic old lady—she was ever radiant and attractive—but she tempered the parts she accepted to fit her age. As a result, she never made a fool of herself and didn't out of desperation add one of those "why did she do it?" roles to her filmography. Although she left the movies by choice, her career did not end abruptly. Like Loretta Young, she appeared often on

television (even on Young's own series), and she went on turning down film roles, among them *The Swan* in 1956 and *Gigi* in 1958.



Irene Dunne in four of her greatest roles in the 1940s ... (*above*) as Mama in *I Remember Mama* ... (*below*) as the very patient, but cleverly manipulative wife to William Powell in *Life with Father* ...





... as the brave ferry command pilot who loses her love (Spencer Tracy) to the perils of war in *A Guy Named Joe* ... and as the real-life schoolteacher whose story is told in *Anna and the King of Siam* (with Rex Harrison, *below*).



No rumors of difficult behavior, offscreen affairs, or “steel butterfly” habits ever came Dunne’s way. She maintained an

impeccable reputation all her life. When her husband died at age seventy-nine in 1965, they had shared thirty-seven happy years. After she retired voluntarily from films, Irene Dunne appeared often on radio and television, and also made records and appeared on the covers of sheet music, but one thing that sets her apart is her remarkable list of awards and honors. Starting when she was just a girl, she began winning scholarships and gold medals for her singing. Her Oscar nominations are well known, of course, but few realize that her recording of “Lovely to Look At” from *Roberta* ranked number 20 on the popular sales chart the year it came out. The showbiz awards always were there, but many of her other accolades are from *real life*: countless honorary degrees, medals, awards. Her last great honor was for her entire life and career: the Kennedy Center Honors in December 1985. Dunne served her country in the United Nations, was active in politics, performed many religious duties, and supported numerous charities.



Citizen Irene Dunne, an alternate delegate of the United States to the United Nations.

Like all the dignified female stars of her era, she was repeatedly knocked by Pauline Kael, who couldn't stand her, saying Dunne "does something funny with her teeth that makes us want to slap her."* But this is a minority—you might even say perverse—opinion, and Dunne's reputation grows as new generations see her in *The Awful Truth* and *Show Boat*. In the January–February 1980 issue of *Film Comment*, James McCourt wrote a superb analysis of Dunne's on-screen persona and charm that is the definitive word on the subject: "Irene Dunne seems more than, less than, or other than a movie star." She summed up her career in a way that bore out everything her life had been about. "I took my work seriously," she said. "Everything I did had a purpose. It wasn't just a superficial acting job for the moment. It was tremendously important to me ... but ... I knew all along that acting was not everything there was." In other words, she never thought of herself as a product, and didn't let anyone else do so either. She became a star and ignored the whole system.†

NORMA SHEARER



Norma Shearer

Like Loretta Young, Norma Shearer, once unequivocally the First Lady of MGM, began in silent films (in uncredited roles around 1920) and found her first big success opposite Lon Chaney (in 1924's *He Who Gets Slapped*). She, too, easily made the transition to sound, her first "talkie" being *The Trial of Mary Dugan* in 1929. Shearer was eleven years older than Young, however, having been born in 1902, and this extra decade as a grown-up actress allowed her to have achieved considerable success in silent movies. She was already a star when sound arrived, and thus, even more than Young, had no need to be shaped up and defined by the sound studio star machine process.

Both Shearer and Young were hardworking, ambitious, and highly focused women backed up by their families. Shearer always looked after the careers of her siblings. Her brother, Douglas, became the head of MGM's sound department, lasting in that role

for decades and making a name for himself with his recording innovations. Her sister, Athole, married William Hawks, the brother of director Howard.

Young and Shearer both maintained the glamour and impeccable fashion of the movie star offscreen as well as on, and both fought hard for the roles they wanted. They differ in two key ways: Whereas Young persevered at her career after the age of forty, Shearer chose to retire, and whereas Young's career has been devalued over time, Shearer's reputation has been totally destroyed. Her particular specialties as an actress have become obsolete. She's a movie dinosaur. Shearer perfected the sophisticated lady with a soigné wardrobe—the deeply, sentimentally romantic heroine—and the modern woman (of the 1930s) who was struggling to cope with problems of sex, adultery, and divorce in a world shifting its sexual mores. (She also had another type: any role that could have the word *prestigious* attached to it.) Since none of Shearer's types are of much interest or any use to general audiences today, no one focuses on how good she was at presenting all of them. The common notion about Shearer is that she's dated, and that if her films were revived, they'd be hooted off the screen. As a result, no one revives them, except for *The Women*, in which she's bolstered by the very modern qualities of Paulette Goddard and the eternally satisfying bitchiness of Joan Crawford as Crystal. It's not Shearer's fault that cultural attitudes shifted under her feet, and at the very least her "women" should be of some historical, if not entertainment, value. The remarkable thing about her is that when her films are seen, it's astonishing how she turned all her characters into independent creatures. Her ability to do so was a reflection of her own private life, because another thing no one focuses on is how independent Norma Shearer was. She was good at disguising it, although she never made a secret of her naked ambition. Shearer's reputation has been given the coup de grâce by a simple biographical fact: In September 1927, she married legendary MGM producer Irving Thalberg, and it is now commonplace to assume unfairly that he made her career for her.

There is no question but that Shearer found a mentor in Thalberg. Her story is an example of the star machine skewed out of its normal trajectory by the influence of a major mogul. Once Shearer came under Thalberg's personal wing she was taken out of the machine and "handmade." There are, in fact, other examples of this in Hollywood's history—David O. Selznick and Jennifer Jones, and, God help us, Herbert Yates and Vera Hrubá Ralston. (And there's a British version—Herbert Wilcox and Anna Neagle.) However, Shearer deserves more credit than she gets for shaping her own career. She was already on her way when she first met Thalberg. An overview indicates something more than just a "star marries for Oscar role" tale of ambition, which isn't to say that she didn't know what she was doing, or that she didn't get her Oscar role. Offscreen, Norma Shearer was known to be shrewd, driven, and ambitious.* When the sickly Irving Thalberg—with his dragon of a mama—began to take a serious interest in her, everyone assumed that Shearer was pursuing him only for career reasons. She liked to tell an "amusing little anecdote" about how when she first saw Thalberg, she thought the impossibly young-looking producer was an "office boy." It was a calculated story—"You see, I didn't know he was Thalberg, so how could I have been chasing him for the wrong reasons?" Whatever her true motivations, Shearer married Thalberg in a Hollywood ceremony ("just a little wedding") that could eclipse any of today's celebrity extravaganzas. She had yards and yards of organdy, an orchid bouquet, a rose-bedecked trellis designed by Cedric Gibbons, and Bessie Love, Marion Davies, and Louis B. Mayer's two daughters as bridesmaids. (Louis B. himself was best man.) No one quite knew what to make of the Shearer-Thalberg union. (Both mothers wore black to the wedding.) In a town of ambitious cynics, almost everyone assumed the worst about Shearer's motives, but they also feared Thalberg and Mayer, and kept their mouths shut. Only Joan Crawford had the nerve to say what people thought. "She doesn't love him, you know," she told Adela Rogers St. John, the town crier of the era. "She's made a sacrifice for what she can get out of him, knowing he's going to die on her." (Crystal couldn't have said it better.)



Mr. and Mrs. Irving Thalberg entraining for their European vacation, with Shearer wearing the required corsage and Thalberg the carefully folded pocket handkerchief



... The elegant Hollywood hostess, Norma Shearer Thalberg



... and the Thalbergs, Hollywood's official "first couple," taking some sun but remembering to show off their outfits.

Thalberg's mother, the formidable Henrietta, hadn't been pleased when her son fell in love with the high-steppin' silent movie star, glamorous Constance Talmadge. By contrast, Shearer seemed downright tame, and Henrietta was happy enough to welcome her into Thalberg's life. In her excellent autobiography, Irene Mayer Selznick (daughter of Louis B. Mayer) wrote that Shearer gave the performance of her life in front of Henrietta, playing a "potentially

low-key, highly manageable candidate for wife,” remaining calmly “non-possessive” but also “determined.” After Shearer finally became Mrs. Thalberg, she moved into the home her husband had been sharing with his mother and allowed Henrietta to rule the roost. Selznick writes: “Guests were invited by Henrietta, and she was the hostess who was thanked. The servants were hers, as were the menus.” Later, after she escaped Henrietta, Shearer told Selznick she became pregnant because “it was the only way I could get out of there.” (Henrietta Thalberg could have been the original mother-in-law joke.)

Whatever she felt or whatever made her decide in favor of her marriage, Norma Shearer played her roles offscreen as well as she did on. She was a faithful wife to Thalberg, a loving mother to their two children, and more important, she was able to hoodwink his frightful mother into accepting her. Shearer had the brains always to defer to the whims of Henrietta Thalberg. For this alone, she earned the help her husband gave her. If her marriage was nothing more than a career bargain, as some thought, Shearer honored the deal she made.

After her marriage, Shearer’s career rose to new heights. She had married the machine. In a tribute retrospective at Eastman House in 1970, curator James Card wrote that in twenty-two years, Shearer had played the leading role in forty-seven of her fifty movies. He wrote that “until her retirement in 1942 she held her place as one of the foremost stars through a time when film stardom provided America’s equivalent of nineteenth-century European royalty.” Clearly a fan, Card nevertheless nailed down an honest definition of Shearer’s fame: “The more one tries to isolate the qualities that made Norma Shearer unique the more one heads into an area of a kind of gracious dignity—a serene purity of bearing and attitude that eludes sensible definition. For certainly she played a good share of audacious, sometimes even wicked, and often declass   women—but never without that special Shearer aura of wholesome probity—along with most of the other positive attributes that have vanished wholly from a morally dismal world.” While speaking glowingly of

her talent, he inadvertently reveals her problem today: She belongs to another era.

Shearer's film career can be easily organized: from 1920 to 1929, in which she rose to stardom and married Thalberg; 1929 to 1931, in which she moved successfully into sound, won an Oscar, and defined Hollywood's idea of the sophisticated, glamorous modern woman; 1932 to 1939, in which every role she played was designed to be "important"; and 1940 to 1942, her fairly sad swan song in which she struggled to deal with a world that had changed but her roles hadn't.

In her silent years, Shearer appeared in approximately thirty-four feature films,* working steadily. It was during this time that she met Irving Thalberg. Being smart about how the business worked, she was soon sitting in his office (and probably in his lap), discussing her career, begging his advice—and getting his help in obtaining better roles. Which she got. It was Thalberg who arranged for Shearer's big break in Chaney's *He Who Gets Slapped* in 1924, in which she played a beautiful bareback rider who falls in love with John Gilbert. But Thalberg was tough with her, loaning her out to other companies for indifferent properties, making her work hard to learn her craft. She was willing, and it was her own talent that made his support bear fruit. By the time she made her last silent film (*Lady of Chance* in 1929), Norma Shearer had become a big star.

Thoroughly established, she moved easily into sound, having a pleasing voice (and a brother who was there to make sure it was properly recorded). Her "talkie" debut, *The Trial of Mary Dugan* (1929), was very successful, and she earned excellent reviews for her role as a showgirl being tried for a murder she didn't commit. She then embarked on a remarkable three-year period in which she was *the* glamour girl in the MGM hothouse of stars.* She made an astonishing run of movies: *The Last of Mrs. Cheyney* (1929); *Their Own Desire*, *The Divorcée* (her Oscar role), and *Let Us Be Gay* in 1930; and *Strangers May Kiss*, *A Free Soul*, and *Private Lives* in 1931. In each she was afloat in high society, superbly dressed, and remarkably liberated. These were pre-code films in which, like Loretta Young, Shearer was hot as a pistol. One has only to see her

in *A Free Soul*—leaning back on a velvet couch, her breasts shifting around enticingly in her low-cut gown, as she holds out her arms to Clark Gable and boldly intones, “Come on ... put ’em around me”—to get a real shock about what her screen appeal was in those days. (It also puts Thalberg into perspective. He surely got his half of their bargain.)



Norma Shearer in her Oscar-winning performance as *The Divorcée*, shocking the masses with curls, cleavage, and cocktails.

Norma Shearer in the 1930s was the movie explanation about what had happened to the woman's world during the 1920s. The first thing to be observed is that she's astonishingly vivacious. And versatile. It's not she herself, but the roles she plays that are out of date. Fed up with a philandering husband in *Divorcée*, she decides to give him a taste of his own medicine—if he isn't faithful, why should she be? In *A Free Soul* she's a rule-breaking daughter of a successful lawyer, and she takes up with a low-down gangster (Clark

Gable, making his mark) in an explicitly low-down manner. And in *Private Lives* she enacts the leading role in Noël Coward's comedy of modern manners in which people change mates as easily as they change their hats.

In these movies, Shearer is brilliant at making cool, sophisticated ladies seem sympathetic. She could do the comedy version or she could do the tragic women's film version. She could work in any direction—play someone willing to step down into the gutter for a little hey-hey, or someone stepping up *from* the gutter because she was experienced at a lot of hey-hey. Shearer knew how to go all ritzy and high class in a democratic way. Beneath her silks there seemed to be a potential bad girl. She was intriguing: proper on the one hand, naughty on the other. (People today simply don't know what to make of such characters. They might as well be from another planet. The rules of proper sexual behavior Shearer plays off don't exist in today's universe, so contemporary viewers can't find a way to take hold of her performances.)

Offscreen, Norma Shearer grasped as well as any female star—including Joan Crawford and Lana Turner—that she had to play the role of Movie Queen in her private life and play it to the hilt. She embraced glamour, appearing at premieres and nightclubs and parties dressed as lavishly as any of her on-screen sophisticates. She also embraced her role as First Lady, assuming a lighthearted, charming, yet deadly serious mien as Hollywood's resident queen. She became adept at shaping opinions about her performances. In a 1932 interview for the *Los Angeles Times*, she cleverly compared herself unfavorably with other actresses playing sophisticated roles: "I can't do the Garbo or Dietrich thing. I admire them both greatly and wish I could play the kind of character they interpret. But I have to go through a transition to be worldly. Every actress can't be a Garbo or a Dietrich, but many can be sophisticated—and it pays!" Shearer's "little old me in my secondhand lamé" routine worked the room, establishing her as Garbo and Dietrich's equal, disarming any criticisms about her not being as good as they were, and connecting her "unworldly" democracy directly to her fans.

As early as 1931, Shearer can be seen shaping her offscreen self in a short called *The Christmas Party*. It was MGM's fake little story about how Jackie Cooper has to go to Shearer for help in planning a studio holiday party, and she, gaily trilling with light laughter and graceful flips of her wrist, jumps right in. Shearer, playing Norma Shearer, overacts in a way she never does when she's playing a role. (It's interesting to see that "Norma Shearer" was Norma Shearer's worst performance. She can't sit still, even though she understands it's important for her to let her fans believe she is who they think she is.)

After her run of modern heroines, her Oscar win, and the establishment of herself as the social queen of Hollywood, Norma Shearer was on top of the world.* She was utterly free from studio politics, well protected from the daily machine maneuvers. She had placed herself where she wanted to be—playing the gay, sophisticated woman, the one with the wardrobe, the jewels, and the cigarette holder. During this period, movie glamour was her thing. She swanned around in satin off-the-shoulder lounging pajamas, swished past a hoped-for suitor, and dropped her napkin ("my serviette") and flirted and laughed and postured with the best of them. This was the style of her times, and Shearer mastered it, giving it just a touch of her own. She kept her hairstyle always simple, usually shaped around her lovely ears and set close to her head. She knew she was a small woman who couldn't carry off pounds of hairdo unless it was a period wig, as in *Marie Antoinette*, where she wears one confidently, but as a wig. (Even the most beautiful and fashionably turned-out stars of Shearer's day were often seen in silly hairdos. Crawford, Loy, Russell, even Garbo, appeared on-screen wearing hairstyles that compete with their looks and that are hideously dated.) Shearer's hair is never distracting; no one spends an entire scene looking at doodads in her hair. Shearer also wears clothes brilliantly. Like Crawford, who could wear weird architectural structures on her head and her body, Shearer wore whatever was put on her in a way that made strange duds look not only comfortable but as if they were grown on her, like skin. Given the fact that she has no height with which to carry off elaborate

long trains, it's a miracle how she wears them and makes it all work. (Her physical proportions are perfect.) She comfortably wears the unwearable styles of her time: cloche hats, pleated skirts, gowns cut on the bias without an ounce of room underneath them, with great gobs of fur trim. As a result, her comfort and ease lift her out of her limited fashion frame. She becomes classic.

By 1932, Shearer had the money, the fame, the Oscar, and the box office success. Now she wanted the "prestige," one of Hollywood's favorite words, its holy grail. She clearly wanted to be more than a vague MGM's "First Lady." She aspired to be a specific First Lady of the American Screen. Of her next eight films, six were based on celebrated stage plays: *Smilin' Through* (1932), in which she played the Jane Cowl role; *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934) with Shearer in the Katharine Cornell part; *Romeo and Juliet* in 1936; *The Women* in 1939; and also in 1939, *Idiot's Delight*, where she did the Lynn Fontanne part opposite Clark Gable's Alfred Lunt. (She had already appeared in the Gertrude Lawrence role in the movie version of Noël Coward's *Private Lives*.)

Shearer released two of her new "prestige" films in 1932. The first was *Strange Interlude*, starring her with Clark Gable, Robert Young, Maureen O'Sullivan, and a roster of first-rate character actors. It is the celebrated clinker Metro made out of Eugene O'Neill's pretentious stage play in which all the characters "talked" their inner thoughts while everyone else stood around and waited for them to finish. (Groucho Marx dubbed it "Strange Inner Tube.") Her other 1932 release, *Smilin' Through*, had already been made with Norma Talmadge in 1922. Shearer's remake became a beloved movie, so successful that it was again remade less than a decade later (in 1941) in a Technicolor musical version for Jeanette MacDonald. Shearer's "generational" dual role is the beginning of her moving away from her sexy, somewhat racy modern women, on to the grande dame roles she felt were suitable for MGM's First Lady. The story concerns a young bride struck down on her wedding day, only to be "reborn" in another generation (as an identical "orphaned niece"). It's the kind of movie that people think doesn't get made anymore because audiences are too sophisticated.

Shearer's original lover, now a bitter old man, envisions his original sweetheart. Are we talking *Ghost* (1990) here, or *Always* (1989)? Or even *Kiss Me Goodbye* (1982)? We *do* make these movies today. The supernatural return of a love lost through death has always been a topic for motion pictures, and Shearer's version of *Smilin' Through* became a memorable one for moviegoers of the early '30s.

After these prestige movies, between 1932 and 1939 Shearer would make only eight more films. She took time off to have her children and to travel to Europe with her family, ultimately releasing no films in 1933 or 1935. She didn't appear in a single movie in 1937, the year following her husband's untimely death at the age of thirty-seven. The films she did make in this period carried on her established tradition. She briefly returned to her modern ladies mode for *Riptide*, in 1934, which was followed by her version of Elizabeth Barrett in the "prestigious" *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* (1934), a sensitive performance in an excellent film. Next was her *Romeo and Juliet* (1936), a storied film, and mostly ridiculed for the fact that Shearer and her co-star, Leslie Howard, were deemed to be too old to play the young lovers, not to mention that they were thought not to be up to the demands of Shakespeare, being but humble movie stars of international glory. Few films that cost as much as *Romeo and Juliet* have a worse reputation, but in truth it's a beautiful film, magnificently designed by Cedric Gibbons and Oliver Messel, costumed by Messel and Adrian, directed with pace and style by George Cukor, and featuring dances created by Agnes de Mille. Shearer and Howard are supported by an amazing cast: John Barrymore as Mercutio, Edna May Oliver as the nurse, Basil Rathbone as Tybalt, with C. Aubrey Smith, Reginald Denny, Ralph Forbes, and Andy Devine rounding out the cast. The stark black-and-white patterns of the costumes, the polished floors, the hanging banners, and the magnificent sets are a feast for the eyes, but best of all, Howard and Shearer actually are a very touching Romeo and Juliet. Clearly, they are not teenagers, but they don't look *that* old. They play with delicacy, a sweet kind of passion that is nevertheless palpable. They are old enough to understand the emotions of the play but not too old to feel its pulse. It's an underrated movie and

an excellent example of what MGM could do when Irving Thalberg was carrying out his wife's desires.

Shearer's first big movie following her husband's death was a film he had helped plan for her, *Marie Antoinette*, one of the most lavish MGM movies of any decade. Shearer is magnificent. Although surrounded by enough opulence to swamp a lesser light, she carries off the role of the doomed French queen brilliantly ... not an easy thing to do given the overlong and somewhat turgid script. A tiny woman, she's required to move about the cavernous sets wearing a huge powdered wig that gives her a good two feet extra in height, dragging satin dresses (by Adrian) that are about four feet wide, loaded with feathers and jewels and ribbons. Shearer flies along in these getups as if she's roller-skating in a bathing suit.

Marie Antoinette is one of Shearer's most revealing performances. She aspired to "the theatre," and her role models were clearly the great dames of her day, the Lynn Fontannes and the Katharine Cornells. Her performance style emulates what would be great theatrical playing of the day—graceful arm movements, little twirls about, delightful little laughs, and head movements that telegraphed emotions. Her line delivery was light and arch, from an era that is gone. Yet Shearer is clever. She knows how to tap into this theatrical tradition but tamp it down low to disarm the ruthless eye of the camera. She controls it, fits it into the frame, and tempers it for a mass audience. She perfectly modulates her acting style, blending theatre and film as almost no other actress of those years could do, yet her respect for the theatrical performing of the great actresses of her time is another thing that has caused her to be labeled "dated" today.

In *Idiot's Delight* and *The Women* (in 1939), Shearer was without her husband's guidance for the first time in over a decade. She suddenly seems off base, being too arch in the former, and not as arch as audiences were used to in the latter. Those who dislike her performance in *The Women* might consider the fact that she's been given the most difficult role, that of the loving, betrayed wife. And who else could stand up to Joan Crawford, who nearly eats her alive? (After years of resentment, Crawford at last gets to blow

Shearer out the door, although Shearer *does* manage to match Crawford in their big confrontation scene, maintaining her ladylike stance in the face of Crawford's animal intensity.)



Norma Shearer portrayed the way her husband, Irving Thalberg, liked to picture her: as a queen, bejeweled, gowned, and properly bewigged, surrounded by an admiring public (Joseph Schildkraut, *left*) in *Marie Antoinette*.

Shearer, like Young and Dunne before her, arrived at full career maturity in 1940, but while the other two took steps to ensure their longevity, Shearer didn't. She didn't go independent. She didn't leave her home studio of MGM, where she owned large quantities of stock and was the Widow Thalberg. She didn't find new roles, new directions. Having had a mentor and guide in her husband, she seemed unwilling or unable to provide such help for herself, even though she was always known to be a tough fighter for roles and a shrewd manipulator of her situation as star and "first lady." She didn't try to update her image.

Shearer's last really serious movie was an adaptation of a popular novel, *Escape* (1940). It's a brink-of-war story about Nazis and concentration camps, with an intricate plot and a strong supporting cast that includes stalwarts like Albert Basserman, Conrad Veidt, Bonita Granville, Philip Dorn, Blanche Yurka, Felix Bressart, and the legendary Alla Nazimova, who almost always turns out to be less than you expect. Shearer is paired with Robert Taylor, Metro's most beautiful male hero and their answer to Fox's Tyrone Power. No real romance takes place between them—the mark of the deadly serious movie. Shearer, in a tiny salute to her advancing age, plays a widowed countess whose husband was Austrian. She's an American who, when she tried to return to her native country after her husband's death, found that *his* country had become *hers* emotionally. She now runs a finishing school for girls out of her mansion in Austria and is secretly the mistress of a very, very civilized Nazi officer (Veidt). (Their relationship is one of the most mature seen on screen in this period. They're comfortable and respectful of each other, having been together for ten years.)



Three of Clare Boothe Luce's women from *The Women*: Joan Crawford (*left*), Norma Shearer (*center*), and Rosalind Russell (*right*), dressed in gowns by Adrian.

At this point, Shearer had been a top star since the late 1920s. She was thirty-six years old, no longer a girl. In those days, mature women were dressed like mature women, and unlike what happens today, she's not on-screen hopping around in a T-shirt and sneakers as if she were a teenager. The Norma Shearer of *Escape* is *dressed*. When Taylor first encounters her at an outdoor skating area, she's

wearing a white nubby coat that is whiter than the snow around her. She later meets him in the lobby of his hotel, wearing standard 1940s female armor: fur hat, fur muff, high-heeled shoes, white gloves, elegantly cut black suit with a gigantic sparkling pin on the shoulder and, underneath, a white lacy blouse showing at the throat and the edge of the sleeves. Shearer in *Escape* stands as an example of echt glamour at the end of the 1930s just as the calendar turns over to what will be a very different world, where she and her outfits will be dated. In her close-ups, Shearer doesn't look a day older than she did back with Lon Chaney in *He Who Gets Slapped*, being one of those small women who never take on fat. (This woman didn't age, and if it was her goal to get off the screen before it finally happened, she more than accomplished it.)

Following *Escape*, Shearer was off the screen for two years, marrying the man she would remain with for the rest of her life. He was an Irving Thalberg look-alike, a ski instructor she met in Sun Valley, Martin Arrouge. Hollywood gossip went wild when Norma Shearer married a skier who was younger than she was. She rocked the town, even though she'd given fair warning she was still alive. Following a suitable period after Thalberg's death, she had embarked on a red-hot love affair with George Raft, and was also rumored to have had an affair with—hold on—Mickey Rooney. Her two final films were both released in 1942: *We Were Dancing* and *Her Cardboard Lover*. Where *Escape* had at least been geared to current events, these two lackluster movies were throwbacks to her 1930s sophisticated comedies. She had mastered the material, but it was now wrong for the times where it had once been right.

In *We Were Dancing*, her light touch is still in place, but it's dated: too brittle, too silly. She is still classy and elegant, but she seems irrelevant. The day of the sophisticated lady with jewels, furs, and concerns about adultery is over—at least her version of it is. The persona she had honed so carefully for herself as the crème de la crème of MGM, which had helped to define her as a *star*, was going down the drain as the age of teenagers, bobby-soxers, democratic little girls-next-door, waitresses and welders, and gals who could sing and dance and show off their great legs was getting

ready to take over. There wasn't going to be any room for a Norma Shearer. At least that's what she began to fear.

By the time of *Her Cardboard Lover* (1942), America was at war and women needed to put their hair up in nets and get out to the factory to weld their way to victory. Shearer, the woman who had aspired to being Lynn Fontanne or Gertrude Lawrence, was out of step.* Her entrance in *Her Cardboard Lover* is classic Shearer. She's in diamonds, of course, and a filmy black formal gown with matching stole. She has a huge peony fastened on her bosom ("they're not real flowers," she tells Robert Taylor, handing them over as a token). She wears a smart 1940s hairdo, carries a cigarette holder a foot long, and literally sweeps into a gambling casino. She's every inch the smart sophisticate of the 1930s, the kind of woman such an establishment always keeps a special chair for in its main hall. The problem is that it's now the 1940s. Shearer's out of date on the home front. Although she's still slim, elegant, and impeccably dressed, it doesn't matter anymore. She's described as "a doll in the toy shop window," a character who so overwhelms Robert Taylor when he meets her that he can't speak for several minutes (we can bless her for that).

After *We Were Dancing*, Shearer was said to have been offered the title role in *Mrs. Miniver*, which might have revitalized her career and updated her image. But, allegedly, at forty she didn't want to play a mother. (She *was* one, of course.) And so, with MGM no longer behind her as it had been, the star who had spent most of her career there just quit. She never appeared again in a movie.

Many reasons have been offered for Shearer's departure: no Thalberg to guide her, good roles were deserting her, she didn't want to play mothers, her new husband, her children, the desire for a rest—she had been working most of her life—and just plain age. The latter can be eliminated. She looked fabulous and acted with grace, but perhaps she had learned a business lesson from Thalberg. She was no longer good box office. Once she understood that, she left and never came back. She got out while the getting out was good and lived to be eighty-one, dying in 1983.

When Shearer left the MGM screen, she more or less deeded it, without necessarily intending to, to the woman who *did* take the *Mrs. Miniver* role and earned an Oscar for it, Greer Garson. Garson's career actually has its own longevity and box office power, but it's seldom discussed that way. She began in films in 1939 and made her last real movie in 1967 but continued with theatre and television, making her final appearance on ABC's hit television show *The Love Boat* in December 1982. That's forty-three years, and considering that she didn't have to work (her husband was rich) and that she didn't enter films until she was thirty-three, she racked up an impressive record. Her career was one of the strongest of any female star of her era. Her problem today stems largely from the scorn she received from latter-day critics, especially Pauline Kael, who loved to ridicule both her movies and her "grand lady" style of acting. Nevertheless, Garson was a box office powerhouse, and she was also nominated for an Oscar seven times: for *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1939), *Blossoms in the Dust* (1941), *Mrs. Miniver* (1942, for which she won), *Madame Curie* in 1943, *Mrs. Parkington* in 1944, *The Valley of Decision* (1945), and finally for *Sunrise at Campobello* in 1960. It's a mark of how dominant she was as a star to realize she was considered a Best Actress candidate in 1939, 1941, 1942, 1943, 1944, and 1945 (and she should have been nominated in 1940 for *Pride and Prejudice*).^{*} American audiences have always had a curious desire for Garsonesque "great lady" movie actresses to be cast in "important" female roles and bring "dignity" to Hollywood's presentation of women. Starting in the silent era, with Norma Talmadge, and continuing through early talkies (with Ann Harding) and proceeding through Shearer to Garson and onward to Deborah Kerr and even Grace Kelly, Hollywood has fed the audience's need for the "class" actress.[†] These women were stars who could go beyond mere ladylike performances, soaring into Great Acting to portray the Great Women of History. They were noble, grand, fine, brave, representing the need for everyone (the business *and* its audience) to think that Hollywood had more than female sex symbols or untalented beauties: It had *actresses*. This tradition

continues today in the form of Meryl Streep, our modern doyenne of Great Lady in Great Pictures. (If *Madame Curie* is remade, Streep will be cast.) Lady Meryl is a slightly rum-pot version of this tradition, but she's still the logical successor to the Talmadge/Shearer/Garson tradition.

LORETTA YOUNG, Irene Dunne, Norma Shearer, (and Greer Garson, for that matter) were all actresses who made films over three decades, with Young lasting even longer. Besides Young, Dunne, and Shearer, there were two other big-name female movie stars who were famous for doing things their own way: Katharine Hepburn and Barbara Stanwyck. Hepburn was Jean Arthur in reverse. In an interview in a 1934 issue of *Liberty*, Hepburn tells Adela Rogers St. Johns that she doesn't like to talk about herself and then proceeds to talk about herself: details of her family, her upbringing, her theatrical background, her brother's death, how psychology can be used in acting, her personal creed, her ideas about golf, et cetera. Finally, coyly, yet performing with stunning guile, she says, "I hope you like me." And it worked. St. Johns concludes her article by saying she feels that "someday Katharine Hepburn will be our greatest actress." Hepburn cleverly took charge of her interviews, defining herself as someone too unique and independent to *need* promoting: a way of remaining inside the publicity machine while claiming to be separate from it. Hepburn, of course, could afford to be independent. She not only had personal style and considerable talent, but also was bolstered by a college education (Bryn Mawr) during an era when few movie stars had even finished high school. Hepburn had solid family support from a group of equally strong-minded and well-educated people who, while not rich-rich, were well off. (When she became dissatisfied with her RKO contract, Hepburn bought herself out of it. Having such options automatically guaranteed her independence from the studio system.)

Stanwyck's independence grew out of her need to feel financially and professionally secure. Stanwyck found having a studio contract

to be a source of safety, so she sidestepped total control by signing a nonexclusive contract. (This meant that, although she *was* under studio contract and subject to the studio's whims, she could at the same time play roles offered to her by others if she so wished.) A tough negotiator from a hardscrabble background, Stanwyck was smart enough—and talented enough—to sign nonexclusive contracts with more than one studio at the same time. This gave her maximum security (two studios owned her) and maximum flexibility (she could move back and forth from one studio to the other, choosing which roles she'd play, when she would play them, and whom she'd play them with). It wasn't about being independent *from* the studio system for her, but about being free to work for as long as possible, as often as possible, and in the best possible roles. She never wanted to own the shop, like Loretta Young; she never found personal happiness outside her career like Dunne; and although she married two men in show business (Frank Fay and Robert Taylor), she never let a man run her career like Shearer did. Barbara Stanwyck did things her own way, making the system itself her source of independence. One of her directors, Jacques Tourneur, said of her, "She only lives for two things, and both of them are work."

The stories of Young, Dunne, and Shearer might suggest that career longevity for women as stars may be linked to breaking the machine. Dunne resisted typing by being able to play across three genres, and she came to Hollywood already a star. Shearer, who became a big star in the silent years, stepped aside from manipulation by putting herself in Thalberg's hands. Young found a way to trick the machine. She used it but kept her name and a personal identity without getting trapped into an image and label she couldn't maintain as she aged. Their careers are among the great exceptions to the rule of the machine.

* All her life, Loretta Young was called Gretch by her family and those who knew her best. She changed her name to "Loretta" only for movies.

† Young didn't establish an actual screen type (other than pretty young thing) in silent films, so moving over to sound was not a problem for her. In the beginning of her career,

she was sometimes called “the new Janet Gaynor” before the old one had lost popularity. In fact, Gaynor’s career illustrates how a type could move from silent to sound. Gaynor was a somewhat childlike, ethereal, but inherently optimistic silent type. When sound came, she did not cut her silent self loose, but added it onto a perkier, more modern presence. In her first all-talking movie, the musical *Sunny Side Up* (1929), her character, like many from her silent days, was a poor little working girl, only now she talked and sang and danced and had a sassy 1930s sparkle. At a tenement block party, Gaynor goes up onto a makeshift stage to do a number. For a moment, she just stands there in her tiny shoes, wearing an off-the-rack print dress and holding a top hat and cane for props. Then she cocks her head to the side, smiles a radiant smile, and uncorks a truly insignificant singing voice. The glory of the moment lies in her rendering of the title song, accompanied by a soft-shoe routine right out of a kiddie dancing school. Confident of her charm (which had been tested in silent movies), trusting no one will mind that she’s not Merman, Gaynor sings in a wobbly little voice: “Be like two fried eggs ... keep your sunny side up, up ... keep your sunny side up!” Audiences saw her as their familiar Janet Gaynor—just with a voice added. Her career trajectory continued upward.

* Young was the product of a remarkable family of intelligent and talented females. First and foremost was her mother, Gladys Belzer, who became a well-known and successful interior decorator (Belzer was her second husband’s name). Two of Young’s sisters also became movie actresses under the names of Sally Blane and Polly Ann Young. Her half-sister, Georgiana, married Ricardo Montalban. Blane, saying how bright Loretta was, also described her sister’s resilience: “She didn’t seem to mind rejection like I did. She didn’t take it personally ... Any rejection she got just made Loretta more determined. ‘What do they know?’ she would say. ‘They’re not going to dismiss *me*.’”

* Young’s religious nature was often a source of hilarity in Hollywood. Joan Crawford once told a guest in her home not to sit in a chair because “Loretta was just sitting there. It probably has the mark of the cross in the seat.”

† Young may not have always been assigned the top directors, but she was always cast opposite the very biggest male stars. In fact, she played leading lady to all the major leading men of four Hollywood decades: Lon Chaney, Edward G. Robinson, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., John Barrymore, Ronald Colman, James Cagney, George Brent, Warren William, Paul Lukas, Franchot Tone, Richard Barthelmess, Spencer Tracy, George Arliss, Clark Gable, Charles Boyer, Tyrone Power, Robert Taylor, Don Ameche, Orson Welles, Gary Cooper, Robert Preston, Fredric March, Brian Aherne, David Niven, Ray Milland, Joseph

Cotten, Robert Mitchum, William Holden, Robert Cummings, Alan Ladd, Van Johnson, Jeff Chandler—and more.

* Not many movie stars were fashionable off the screen. Fred Astaire, Katharine Hepburn, and of course Audrey Hepburn had their own personal style, which never changed over the years. But Loretta Young was named to the best dressed list three times, although one mean columnist said, “She dons a hunting outfit to set a mousetrap.” She made fashion into something everyone could appreciate with her dramatic—and much beloved though much ridiculed—entrances through big doors to introduce her weekly television show. Each week, she opened the doors, swept in wearing a spectacular gown, twirled around so the audience could eyeball it front and back, and then graciously informed everyone what the show would be about. No one who saw them has ever forgotten those entrances. They were the 1950s epitome of stardom, glamour, and high fashion.

* James Cagney is very sexy, something that is seldom written about in discussions of his career, probably because most of the writing about him has been by men.

* Young and Power made five films together. *Love Is News*, *Cafe Metropole*, and *Second Honeymoon* were screwball comedies. *Ladies in Love* was a women’s film and *Suez* an epic biopic. Young said Power was a “dreamy youth ... so beautiful ... he rather resented it.”

* This nun, Young’s character in *Come to the Stable* (1949), earned her a second Oscar nomination for Best Actress. Young lost to Olivia de Havilland in *The Heiress*.

† Loretta Young also made few of the movies that are usually labeled “women’s pictures,” although she did make some. *Paula* (1952) and *Cause for Alarm* (1951) were melodramas, noirish in presentation.

* The movie works because of Young’s prudery and her latter-day ladylike dignity. Gable plays the kind of guy who could spot a real woman underneath the cold exterior, and, like the prospector he is, he strikes gold once more. In their big love scene, which takes place in the fog atop Telegraph Hill in San Francisco, Young starts out saying, “I demand respect,” and then switches suddenly from moving away from his advances to turning to him and asking, “Why don’t you kiss me? That’s what you brought me up here for, isn’t it?” This shift scares him so badly (“I’m a longshoreman and you’re a Harvard man,” he has said earlier) that he pulls back his advance. He tells her he respects her, and now she says that *everyone* respects her. “Disrespect me, puh-leeze.”

† In fact, the glory of having her own TV series meant that Young could—and did—play anything: In one season she was a Japanese wife, a Swedish servant, an Indian Maharani, a gangster’s girl, a waitress—and a nun.

‡ According to an article in *Collier's* magazine, she took to speaking them offscreen, also. Interviewer Jim Marshall reported that Young had “taken to giving out like a Delphic Oracle on a variety of subjects, mainly love, courtship, marriage and how to use leftovers.”

* Those who had been stunned by her never forgot her. On a 2005 sports interview show, the octogenarian coach Red Auerbach startled his youthful interviewer by replying to the question “Who’s your favorite star?” by going dreamy-eyed and replying, “This goes way back, but Loretta Young.” He paused dramatically, puffed on his trademark cigar, and added, “She had a little somethin’.”

† Young died on August 12, 2000, at the age of eighty-seven.

* Some other women on the list in those years were Joan Crawford, Janet Gaynor, Jean Harlow, Mae West, and Greta Garbo.

† Dunne’s five Oscar nominations were for *Cimarron* (1931), *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936), *The Awful Truth* (1937), *Love Affair* (1939), and *I Remember Mama* (1948). She lost to, respectively, Marie Dressler for *Min and Bill*, Luise Rainer for *The Great Ziegfeld*, Luise Rainer for *The Good Earth*, Vivien Leigh for *Gone with the Wind*, and Jane Wyman for *Johnny Belinda*.

* Always an honest and down-to-earth person, Dunne commented at the end of the 1980s, “I haven’t held up as well as Loretta, who is a marvel, hasn’t changed or aged a day since I met her and that was fifty years ago.” While it was true that no one aged less than Loretta Young, I can speak as someone who met Dunne in 1981 and she looked fantastic. She was a surprisingly small woman—tiny, really—but never seemed so on-screen.

* There’s one dramatic moment in Dunne’s offscreen behavior. It’s been said that in 1941, she became so sick and tired of the tour buses outside her home that she donned a disguise and rode one, just to hear what was being said about her. That’s daring, all right. By her own words, Dunne summed up her life as “very quiet.” Her lifelong friend Douglas Fairbanks Jr. said, “Everyone adored Irene ... She had an impeccable offstage reputation as the virtuous wife of a doctor.”

* Director Gregory La Cava said, “If Irene Dunne isn’t the First Lady of Hollywood, then she’s the last one.”

* She was nominated *twice* for comedy: *The Awful Truth* and *Theodora Goes Wild*.

* There was a slight problem with 1943’s *A Guy Named Joe*, in which her original love, played by Spencer Tracy (a man in her own age range), dies in the story and is replaced by

Van Johnson, who is too young for her. But the quality of the film, which is touching, and her delicate performance make it work.

* What Dunne does is make a low, mocking sound of laughter, a little “uh-huh-huh-huh” when she puts someone down. Most people find it utterly charming because it’s relaxed and natural and unique to her.

† Dunne died on September 4, 1990, at the age of ninety-two.

* Lillian Hellman once described Shearer as “a face unclouded by thought.” Nothing about Shearer’s private life suggests this to be true.

* Since Shearer appeared in uncredited roles and bit parts in the silent era, it’s hard to be accurate about the total number of films she made. This number more or less represents the feature films in which she appeared and played significant, or leading, roles.

* Some of her peers also under contract included Garbo and Crawford. Harlow would soon make her first important MGM film in 1931, *The Secret Six*, arriving on the lot to stay in early 1932 when the studio “bought” her from Howard Hughes for \$60,000. When you were First Lady of MGM, you were royalty indeed. Better than real royalty, actually, because you had your choice of several good-looking kings.

* Other actresses resented her for it. Joan Crawford continued to gripe: “How can anyone else get a good role when she sleeps with the boss?” (Crawford wanted roles that were given to Shearer—she had her own ambitions to be First Lady of MGM.) For Crawford, the enemy was always Norma Shearer, never Bette Davis.

* In fact, Shearer *was* the movie Fontanne/Lawrence, since neither of them ever gained movie stardom.

* It’s also true that while Dunne and Young received publicity for their charitable acts and generosity, Garson seldom did. She was, however, a major philanthropist, being especially supportive of education in the arts.

† Such actresses could, of course, step out of “lady” roles and into comedy or unladylike behavior. Just as Garson had her *Julia Misbehaves*, Kerr rolled adulterously on the wet beach with Burt Lancaster in *From Here to Eternity* (1953) and Kelly vamped Cary Grant by offering him a “breast or a leg” out of her basket of chicken in *To Catch a Thief* (1955). When the “lady” Irene Dunne first took her step out of decorum into comedy, in *Theodora Goes Wild*, however, the results were sensational. She not only received huge acclaim, but it changed her into a comedienne as well as a star of “lady” roles. In *Death Becomes Her*

(1992), Meryl Streep took on a hoot of a comedy role as an egomaniacal actress who'll stop at nothing to remain young looking.

**DETACHMENT:
CHARLES BOYER AND
WILLIAM POWELL**

Although old Hollywood movies are often remembered as full of **A**escapist plots, fairy-tale princesses in Ruritanian worlds, get-rich-quick dreams, perfect love affairs, and family circles, the truth is that the business made a lot of movies about grown-ups. Grown-ups with grown-up problems—movies like *Dodsworth* (1936), with Walter Huston and Ruth Chatterton; *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), with Fredric March and Myrna Loy; and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), with Henry Fonda. Of course, not all “adult” movies were *The Grapes of Wrath*. Some of them couldn’t be taken seriously. The grown-ups got amnesia, backed out of the driveway and ran over their sister’s kid (complicating family dinners) or became international opera stars overnight with no singing lessons. But whether movies were serious films that could be taken seriously or serious films that were silly, if they were about a mature person, a mature actor or actress was needed. Hollywood found out quickly that mature audiences would go to the movies when they saw something they could relate to on the screen, such as their own problems: financial pressures, failures of daily communication, general misunderstandings, unruly children, greedy relatives, adultery, and very bad furniture. These issues were often cleverly disguised, appearing in screwball comedies, musicals, murder mysteries, westerns, as well as melodramas and women’s films—but the star system was affected by the fact that Hollywood chose to make movies about grown-ups with grown-up problems that required grown-up stars. (It wasn’t all about youth the way it tends to be today.) As a result, Hollywood needed big-name headliners

who seemed—or were—mature, and those grown-ups weren't just kindly old Judge Hardys, hilarious old Ma and Pa Kettles, or cranky old Dr. Gillespies. The machine developed romantic leading stars out of actors who were already in their thirties (like Greer Garson) or who always looked as if they were in their forties (Walter Pidgeon). As a result, those who manipulated the star machine realized it was *possible*, just possible, to get incredibly lucky by finding actors who would not only age gracefully but also had a timeless, enduring quality. Finding such stars was like striking gold, because the stars and their fans could grow old together. If a property heavily invested in could pay off time and again over decades, *that* would be star heaven, the full triumph of the machine and the studio system. It was too rare to be a realistic goal, but it might happen by accident. And what an amazing concept it was. Longevity! Longevity was the blue ribbon of the system.

Except for the legendary women who have already been discussed, the business usually found these bonuses only among the men. Male movie stars weren't as fragile as their female counterparts. They *could* last for decades. As long as they avoided the booze, maintained a waistline smaller than Rhode Island, and could hold down a toupee in a stiff breeze, there was a chance of a long career. A man could hold ground on-screen, the idea being that the older he got, the better he got, the more romantic and desirable he appeared. These male actors were like Gibraltars. (Female stars must have wanted to open their veins over this.) If a male actor developed a viable type, he could keep going by presenting an older version of that type, because a "mature older man" could still be thought of as handsome, sexy, and viable at the box office. Older leading men could play opposite females young enough to be their daughters without an audience objecting, whereas a mature older woman was considered past her prime, an unsuitable lover for a younger male star unless that was the point of the plot *and* she died or went to prison as punishment for her pleasure. Furthermore, there were many "mature" types of leading roles: legendary heroes, senators, wise doctors, biographical figures, even cowpokes riding

off into the sunset long after they should have. (Western heroes were never age specific.)

Hollywood produced a solid lineup of such male stars: Clark Gable, Gary Cooper, Ronald Colman, James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Humphrey Bogart, Randolph Scott, Joel McCrea, Fred Astaire, and even Jimmy Stewart, whose all-American boyishness should have eliminated him but didn't. The prime example is Cary Grant. As a young man, Grant could put on a woman's negligee with maribou-trimmed sleeves or a WAC's uniform or fall off his chair at a society soirée and never lose face. As an older man, he could shower with his suit on, drive drunk, and operate on José Ferrer's brain without seeming ridiculous. (Cary Grant could always lose face without losing face.)

In fact, it is Grant's ability to be undignified that lifts him to the highest power of elite movie dignity. For any actor in American films, male or female, too much dignity is a problem. Stars had to be wary of becoming *grand*, or seeming to be too much of a lady or too much of a gentleman. (As he prepared to introduce a series of skits to an audience, Ed Gardner, playing the Brooklynite Duffy of *Duffy's Tavern* in 1945, uttered the key words, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and I hope youse don't mind me calling you that.") Grant succeeded in getting the mix of gravitas and goofiness just right.

The records of the top ten ranks show clearly that it was easier for men to last for decades than for women. John Wayne was on top for nearly twenty-five years, Gary Cooper for eighteen, Gable for sixteen, and Bing Crosby for fifteen. It's almost as if, once a male star arrived, longevity was available to him if he wanted it. At first glance, this looks like a great deal for the men, but longevity was tricky. If men could endure longer as stars, the machine could make fewer of them, and that made a successful male movie star a gold mine.

Charles Boyer and William Powell were household names in the 1930s and 1940s, two gold mines who stayed the course. Boyer and Powell *had* longevity, stretching over the 1920s through the 1950s (and in Boyer's case, into the 1960s). Their low-key stability and the

longevity of their careers can be contrasted to the burnout of Errol Flynn, who could be thought of as their naughtier younger movie brother. Flynn had a career that, despite his dissipation and early death, nevertheless was top drawer for nearly twenty years. Had he not chosen to self-destruct and short-circuit his tenure, he could have had the same longevity. Boyer, Powell—and Flynn—are three dashing, handsome “gentleman” stars of the old Hollywood system. Boyer is the romantic one, Powell the sophisticated comic version, and Flynn the adventurous swashbuckler. All three seem to stand to the side of the action, projecting an amused, ironic distance, even when they’re playing at their most sincere and passionate. They enter their films already disillusioned, and thus are disconnected from any plot disappointments. This quality makes all three of them remarkably modern, and their movies date well. For Powell, no form of social embarrassment can bring him down; for Flynn, no fear, no physical danger or pain; and for Boyer, no loss of place or weighty world problems. And for all three, no woman. Each is unflappable, seeing the humor in daily life no matter what it brings. A strong undercurrent of mockery—clearly presented and clearly perceived by audiences—keeps the gentlemanliness they embody from stuffiness. They don’t take the established way of doing things and thinking about things all that seriously. They are always well behaved but never pompous. They are upper crust but low-down about it, which links them directly to an American movie icon, the beloved outlaw—even if in their cases, the outlaw is very well dressed and hanging out in a drawing room (or a bedroom). These three may have wit, wisdom, and wardrobes, and they may duel in love, dialogue, and swordsmanship, but moviegoers of their times saw them as fellow underdogs. Even when they were cast as nobility, they were swell fellows, loved by women and envied by men. Flynn lost it, but Boyer and Powell endured. They were assets for a business that had to grapple too often with star troubles, welcomed because they were both in the system and to the side of its general folderol. Boyer and Powell were detached, both on-screen and off, and it worked.

Another gentlemanly type with career longevity was the ultra-suave and handsome Ronald Colman. A consummate leading man—and debonair to the max—Colman was one of the few male stars able to remain on top after the arrival of sound. Audiences were thrilled to find out that when he spoke, his voice was everything they had imagined it would be: mellifluous, echoing perfect British diction. Colman, who anchored beloved classics like *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1937), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1935), and *Lost Horizon* (1937), projected an aristocratic quality that, although it was a touch aloof, never seemed to separate him from ordinary moviegoers. American audiences accepted his screen presence as high-minded, well-mannered, even noble, yet capable of the most decent sort of democracy. Men responded to his adventurous spirit, and female fans simply *responded*. They adored him. His romantic passions were elegantly calm and beautifully articulated. He was that imaginary male who exists only in the movies—the one who takes a woman in his arms to *talk*, to *say* what he feels, and to define all her charms and special qualities in words. As a lover, Colman was the perfect female fantasy figure. Ronald Colman is the amalgam of Boyer, Powell, and Flynn. He's romantic, foreign, sophisticated, comic, dashing, and adventurous—the three of them rolled into one, and the only one of them to have won an Oscar. In fact, watching Colman is a lesson in what film acting really is. Despite his stage training, his melodious voice, and his ability to deliver dialogue theatrically, Colman is the consummate movie performer. He is understated and calm under the camera's scrutiny. In repeated intense close-ups in *A Tale of Two Cities*, he conveys the pain and irony and despair of a seemingly casual drunkard, the self-sacrificing Sydney Carton, who does a far, far better thing than any one single human being ever would or could do. In a sense, Colman as Carton is an early antihero—the outsider, the loner, the man who doesn't succeed, doesn't get the girl, and doesn't have a happy ending (unless you count beheading as a satisfying solution to life).

CHARLES BOYER



Charles Boyer

Charles Boyer became a Hollywood star because he was French. Not French as in “born in France” (although he had been), but “French” like *Pépé Le Pew*. With his rich, low voice, his charming accent, his big bedroomy eyes, and his Continental swagger, he was every American moviegoer’s idea of Big-time French. He rose to fame on the basis of that stereotype, but he was so much more. Boyer was an exceptionally fine actor, with both depth and range. He achieved top stardom in three countries (France, Germany, and the United States) and was successful in three show business arenas (movies,

stage, and television). From his earliest appearance in a French silent movie in 1920 to his last appearance opposite Liza Minnelli and Ingrid Bergman in *A Matter of Time*, in 1976, he gave fifty-six years of superb performances as hero, villain, lover, comedian, or stalwart old man. His image and his quality were *stable*. Audiences knew they could count on him. But the bottom line of his success—and of all his characters—was a simple one: Charles Boyer was French, always French. Even when he was Chinese, Boyer was French.

Boyer's career shows how clever Hollywood had to be. It had to not only recognize all forms of star potential but also manipulate them successfully. With Boyer, it wasn't easy. A mature man with a solid performance record before he arrived in Hollywood, he never submitted to the workings of the star machine. He was never under long-range contract to any single studio. He was notoriously difficult to negotiate with, having intelligence, good taste in scripts, and a solid business sense. What's more, he had other options: a return to the stage, filming in Europe, even retirement. Boyer was a challenge to the studio system in every way. He was a rather short, aging, slightly balding man with a heavy foreign accent, and he had to be made into an idealized romantic leading man, a real movie star. To accomplish this, Hollywood had to maneuver him into typecasting, and this it did. The horror of the star system—and its power—was that despite never giving himself over to it completely, Boyer was nevertheless defined by it. Hollywood guided him to type—French lover—and took the time to do it because it discovered that audiences liked him that way. The studios might just as easily have cast him differently. The very things that made him a desirable leading man—his Frenchness, his alluring accent—might have doomed him to only a few years in support of big-name female stars or, worse yet, a longer career as a second banana, the guy who doesn't get the girl (a Gallic Ralph Bellamy). He might even have become no more than a stock villain (a Gallic Basil Rathbone). Instead, despite his independence, his ability to play both comedy and drama, his internationalism, his success in many areas, his brains, his firm intentions not to let it happen, Hollywood found and

typecast him. They were clever, but Boyer was canny. Seemingly he gave a Gallic shrug, said, “C’est la vie,” and stabilized his career by accepting his fate. He was very wise about it. He brought humor to what might have been his limitation. He allowed his image to be typed, but because he had real acting talent, he varied and reversed it as his fame mounted. Boyer entered the game, accepted its rules, stayed at the table, and found a way to come out on top year after year. He accepted age. He accepted the collapse of the studio system that had made him a star. He accepted television. He accepted work in any country that offered it. He endured.

Boyer had two major physical assets: his voice and his eyes. His voice seemed to croon, to soothe, to lure. Its lilting foreign accent carried the promise of something delicious, something forbidden. Boyer had what was possibly the sexiest male voice in the movies. His eyes looked sad, almost wounded. They gave audiences the sense that he had suffered deeply yet never lost his belief in some possibility of happiness. Nothing makes a man a star faster than women in the audience believing that they, and only they, can make him happy. Boyer projected “I need you” to female fans, with an added little soupçon of “and that means *only* you, baby, and nobody else.” He seemed not only deeply romantic and wildly sensual, but also like he’d be *fun*. He was a great lover with a touch of humor. He seemed to be a survivor of romantic Sturm und Drang, a man who understood that making a scene or threatening to die for love wasn’t necessary. Something sensibly sexy could be worked out, and even if it turned out to be the grand passion of his/her life, it could be on a civilized basis. No other actor could quite work the deeply, sadly romantic side of the street and still come back down the comic other side the way Boyer could.

How cleverly he could be both romantic and comic without compromising either is well illustrated by comparing his appearance in an *I Love Lucy* episode (1956) to his superb Oscar-nominated performance as Napoleon in *Conquest* (1937), opposite Garbo. In *I Love Lucy*, Lucy encounters Boyer during a trip to Paris, and he becomes her victim as everyone who encounters her inevitably does. (Lucy was a comedy serial killer.) When Boyer, playing himself,

bumps into his old friend Ricky/Desi, he tells him that he's just met Lucy for the first time. Smiling happily, Boyer begins to tell Ricky what happened: "Lucy asked me to—" Before he can even say what, Ricky cuts him right off: "No!" he yells. "No!" No matter what Lucy has requested, Ricky knows it's going to be a disaster for Boyer.

What Lucy has "requested" is a wonderful comedy premise. When she accidentally "met" Boyer, she didn't believe it was really him. Wanting to pretend that she knows Charles Boyer (and not realizing that her husband really does know him), Lucy has hired Maurice DuBois (Boyer) to pretend to be Charles Boyer. She then sets about teaching DuBois how to act like Charles Boyer, constantly telling him he's not doing it right and that he doesn't understand the type. Boyer's timing in response is impeccable. He's as easy and natural in his exaggerated comic Boyer performance as Lucille Ball is in hers as Lucy. Most great actors, certainly most serious actors, can't really play comedy well. Audiences applaud their efforts, but the applause is a form of pity, the good sport award for their being jolly good fellows who generously give their pants permission to fall down. Being willing to try comedy is considered a major accomplishment for an Olivier or a Richard Burton. For Boyer, no pity is required. He not only can play comedy, he can play silly comedy. He can even do slapstick. In *I Love Lucy*, Boyer proves he can ride right over the top and still be Charles Boyer.

Jumping from Boyer as Boyer to Boyer as Napoleon shows his range. He makes fun of his own great lover persona in Lucy's TV show, and he's hilarious. In the movie, however, he has the opposite task—to keep the role of Napoleon, a much-parodied cliché, from *becoming* a joke. And his dialogue doesn't help. When he first encounters Garbo, she's standing in the snow, wrapped in luxurious furs. "Are you real," he asks, "or born of a snowdrift?" (Try to put that one over.) Boyer takes regal command of the character of Napoleon. He is angry and aggressive, then passionate, then playful. He is selfish and self-centered. He is coy and cunning. He charms, and he demands. He manages to depict a martinet who is also irresistible. As Napoleon ages, Boyer plays him as slightly slower in his actions, but without any Tim Conway mannerisms or a

powdered wig or heavily etched-on age lines. As the movie ends, he brings into play his own particular personal specialties. Using his sad eyes and his beautiful voice, invoking the wisdom of the truly world-weary sophisticate, he says to Garbo, “This love of ours. Why hasn’t it broken my heart by now?” His delivery of this single line made his performance worthy of its Oscar nomination.* Boyer’s range explains his remarkable endurance. He is genuinely different in performance style in these two different projects, and yet ultimately he is exactly the same. He is Charles Boyer, French lover, who just happens also to be a great actor.



Charles Boyer in costume and makeup, prepared to play Napoleon opposite Greta Garbo in *Conquest*.

Boyer was born in southwestern France in 1899, and after appearing successfully onstage, made his first movie in France in 1920, *L'Homme du Large*. Between 1920 and 1929, he appeared in five silent films. In that final year, he was approached by an MGM representative on behalf of Irving Thalberg and offered a remarkable deal: \$400 per week to come to Hollywood. The transition to sound had focused the studios on foreign actors with beautiful voices. The offer was made by Paul Bern, the Metro

employee who spoke fluent French and who was famous for developing stars. Boyer was invited to become a key figure in the filming of the French-talking versions of MGM projects, most notably to become a possible “French-speaking” leading man for Garbo. Boyer felt he couldn’t possibly turn down so much money and reassured himself that other French friends—among them, Maurice Chevalier—were already happy in America. Yet he dreaded and feared Hollywood. Although he could speak German, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese in addition to his native French, English eluded him, and he felt no urge to learn it. He made a brief journey to America, where he appeared in the French-speaking version of *The Trial of Mary Dugan* (1929).^{*} He stayed only a few weeks in California, however, because before he completed *Mary Dugan*, he received an offer from the prestigious UFA studios in Germany. He had no special reason to stay in Hollywood, and it looked as if the UFA contract would take him back to Europe on someone else’s dime. Those who knew Boyer always said—and he himself concurred—that he was glad to have seen the famous “Hollywood factory” but was happy to leave and never expected to return. In Germany he made what would become the first talking film released in France (in Germany it was called *Brand in der Oper*, and in France, *La Barcarolle d’Amour*). His UFA contract called for two more films, which were already scheduled.

In the meantime, however, *The Trial of Mary Dugan* (French version) had become a success, and Thalberg had revisited the idea of Charles Boyer on film. He bought out the actor’s UFA contract, planning to turn Boyer into a major MGM asset. Boyer, however, was not particularly enthusiastic and still didn’t speak much English. Undeterred, Thalberg brought him once again to Hollywood and assigned him to the French-language version of *The Big House* (1930), with plans for him to participate in more such projects. In the meantime, the practice of making second versions of successful American films in other languages was proving costly and unnecessary. The Swedes had begun dubbing them, a much simpler, much cheaper process. There was suddenly no need for Boyer as a “duplicator.” Boyer, however, was good-looking, experienced,

reliable. Once he was in Hollywood, he inevitably would come under consideration for a wider range of casting. He made his American film debut in 1931's *The Magnificent Lie*, a Paramount movie starring the then-popular Ruth Chatterton. Although it was shot on Hollywood soundstages, the movie was set in France, so Boyer's accent was not a problem. He played an unsympathetic character—a sinister con man who knew how to charm women, territory he would explore later in one of his greatest films, *Gaslight*. *The Magnificent Lie* was a flop.* Since his English was still not very good, and nothing seemed to be happening for his career, he returned to Europe. Once there, he moved between Paris and Berlin, making some of his best movies of the period, *Le Bonheur* (1933) and *Liliom* (1934) directed by Fritz Lang. In 1934, he was again invited to Hollywood, this time to play opposite Loretta Young in *Caravan*, which also turned out to be a flop. His role—that of a curly-haired Gypsy—required him to stand around in the moonlight playing a fiddle. He later said that he “never looked more ridiculous” and that he had never “felt more uncomfortable” in any part he'd played. “I wasn't the type to play mad music in cinema moonlight.” To the women in the audience, however, he looked exactly like what they would like to find fiddling in their own backyards. They noticed him, and *Caravan* marked the true beginning of his American film career, although he didn't realize it at the time.

The female audience's response to Boyer's character brought him under the scrutiny of the Hollywood star making machine. Boyer definitely saw Hollywood as a temporary abode, and he made immediate plans to leave. But suddenly, in January 1934, something happened that made him want to stay. He met and fell in love with a British actress named Pat Paterson, and twenty-two days later he married her. (He was thirty-four, and she was twenty-three.) As a result, he planned to settle down in Hollywood, at least for a while. Since his experiences to date had not been satisfactory, he refused to sign anything more than a one-picture contract. When producer Walter Wanger came to him looking for an unusual actor to play a

key role in his prestigious up-and-coming movie about a mental institution, *Private Worlds*, Boyer was willing to be cast.

From the release of *Caravan* in 1934 to the end of 1937, Boyer became a movie star—an *American* movie star.[†] After *Private Worlds* (for which his co-star and fellow French countrywoman, Claudette Colbert, was nominated for Best Actress), he began to be cast in romantic support for big-name women stars. In his other two 1935 films, he played opposite Katharine Hepburn in *Break of Hearts* and Loretta Young (again) in *Shanghai*. In 1936, he was the romantic interest of Marlene Dietrich in *The Garden of Allah*. In a great year for his career, 1937, he made three excellent movies: *History Is Made at Night*, opposite Jean Arthur; *Conquest*, with Garbo; and *Tovarich*, again paired with Colbert. He earned his first Oscar nomination (*Conquest*), and solidified his image: romantic, foreign, debonair, capable of both humor and a touch of cruelty. Everything American men were not supposed to be, Boyer was. In addition, 1937 was the year in which his superb French film, *Mayerling*, was released in the United States.

Boyer could be louche. In *Mayerling*,^{*} he played Archduke Rudolph, heir to the Austrian throne, and he was beautiful, the perfect picture of a dangerously bored young noble out on the town with his male friends even though it's his fifth wedding anniversary. Eyes heavy, slightly drunk, drawing deeply on a cigarette, and lounging against a pillowed chaise, he intones, "I'm bored. I'm bored to death." He's present yet ironically distanced from their wild partying. When he later falls in love with a young baroness who can't resist him ("He has such sad eyes and such a sweet smile," something his fans might say), his ennui gives way to passion in a credible manner. He uses the character of an imperfect young royal as a base and weds it to this newfound passion that is desperately afraid that nothing is ever going to turn out right. "What shall I do if you leave me?" he asks his young mistress. "Save me," he begs of her. These are lines that women in the audience ate up. In his close-ups in *Mayerling*, Boyer almost has the face of Garbo—the jaded look of the beautiful person who has seen too much yet

still needs newer, fresher excitements. Like Garbo, he began to be thought of as extraordinarily beautiful. This amused him. He said, “I do not know when I became so nice-looking as they all say. I suppose it was when I lost my hair and began experimenting with toupees. In silent films, I looked like a bandit who eats little children.” This modesty, this self-deprecating quality infused his screen lovers, making them seem boyish, unthreatening, and even *more* charming.

By the end of 1937, Boyer was a major Hollywood asset, but he was not under a typical studio contract. He had worked for Walter Wanger in two Paramount releases and one United Artists project. He had worked for RKO Radio, for David O. Selznick (also releasing through United Artists), for MGM, and for Warner Bros. Despite his great success and obvious appeal, the movie business wasn’t sure what could be done with him. The studios assessed him and saw only “foreign.” That meant potentially limited: no westerns, no small-town roles without building explanations. It meant an accent and baggage to explain. They saw the lover in him, of course. They knew the movies had a long tradition of exotic and foreign lover-type leading men. But they wondered and worried if he could *really* be an American star, and so did he.

Then came 1938 with the role that became his signature and the movie that was his breakthrough to the very top ranks of stardom: *Algiers*. His only release of that year, it is perhaps the most famous of all Boyer movies, an elegant remake of the famous French film *Pépé le Moko*, which starred Jean Gabin as a jewel thief trapped in the native quarter of Algiers known as the Casbah. *Algiers* is gorgeous, shot in black and white by the great James Wong Howe, with sensitive direction by John Cromwell, additional dialogue by James M. Cain, and a stunning wardrobe for leading lady Hedy Lamarr designed by Irene. Boyer plays Pépé, the king of all the criminals who are hiding in the Casbah. He’s been wanted by the French police forever, but no one can trap him when he’s protected by his cohorts in the labyrinthine native quarter. As we are told, the Casbah is “another world,” with its own forty thousand inhabitants, who live where it is “colorful, sordid, dangerous ... a place where it

is easy to go in and not so easy to come out.” With his French accent and heavy-lidded eyes, Boyer is opulent and exotic, which in the movies means erotic. Hedy Lamarr is stunningly beautiful, and *Algiers* is the film that made her Hollywood reputation. Decked out in fur-trimmed satin, pearls, and diamond earrings and bracelets, she is a visual dream. Hedy Lamarr in *Algiers* is what people *think* all movie stars are, but there actually haven’t been too many of her kind. Nature, after all, doesn’t turn out too many Hedy Lamarrs. She isn’t untalented, but she’s limited. And she’s hard to cast. A woman who looks like Lamarr can’t just be banging around the old tuna cannery* the way Joan Crawford could. When Lamarr says to her girlfriend, “Remember ... the two of us behind the counter ... the bargain basement ... handkerchiefs?” the line comes as a shock to the viewer. Lamarr selling hankies in a department store basement? (Her friend warns, “And don’t you forget it—don’t marry for fun.”)

One of the greatest of all movie love scenes is in *Algiers*. Boyer tells Lamarr that, yes, she is beautiful, “so beautiful,” but she must have heard that many times. To him, he says, she is more. She reminds him of the Paris subway. (Boyer was an actor who could tell a woman she reminded him of a subway and make it the greatest compliment she’d ever received.) The two stars, gorgeous, exotic, foreign, their speech heavily accented, lean toward each other in this scene, cooing and murmuring—reciting the names of the consecutive Paris subway stops! It’s awesome.



Charles Boyer and his exquisitely beautiful leading lady, Hedy Lamarr, in the movie that made him a household name and ushered his alleged “Come wiz me to zee Casbah” line into movie history.

The beauty of Lamarr is essential to Boyer’s performance, once again demonstrating the importance of beauty as a performance tool in motion pictures. Lamarr’s looks provide the credibility Boyer needs to endorse his romanticism. She embodies Paris, escape, freedom, return to home, to the subways of his youth. Because she is unparalleled in her glamour, seen in softly lit, lingering close-ups, Boyer’s yearning is made palpable. Lamarr can also match Boyer in his bored sense of resignation, his defeated quality, his acceptance of the consequences of choices made in life. He’s a criminal, but she has her own decadence. *She* wanted clothes. *She* wanted jewels. She has them because *she* has agreed to marry a very fat, very rich old man. (“Look at yourself and look at me,” she tells him after facing

his anger when he learns of her love for Boyer. “I’ve never lied to you.”)

Although foreign in setting and attitude, *Algiers* felt right to Americans just emerging from the Depression. Its characters seemed lost and tired. They had wanted a future and reached out for it, only to see it slip away. No one watching could seriously believe these two would find a happy ending, and audiences identified with their defeat. And Boyer and Lamarr were so, so beautiful, exotic, otherworldly. They managed to do what stars must do: provide a direct connection to what viewers felt while lifting them totally up and away from that emotional constraint. One scene aches with the desire of Depression-era moviegoers to have what they didn’t have. Lamarr, all in white, leans back. Boyer, playing the jewel thief, tears his eyes from her face and studies her jewelry. He knows *how* she got it, but he wants to hope there was a more innocent time in her life. “What did you do before ... ?” he asks, trailing off. Does he dare to say it? “Before what?” she challenges him, languorously. “The jewels,” he replies, and they have traveled miles in explaining themselves to each other. She can give him no easy answer, no reassurance of either her innocence *or* her reliability. What did she do before the jewels? Her simple answer is one Depression audiences could understand: “I wanted them.”

Algiers was a howling success, and Charles Boyer and Hedy Lamarr became household names. They came into small towns everywhere and presented themselves as an immoral, jaded Romeo and Juliet with no illusions except the illusion that they could love each other without complications. The success of the movie had two lasting effects on Boyer’s life and reputation. On the good side, he became iconic, and his type was fine-tuned to the star level. He was not only French, he was “French lover extraordinaire.” He had never signed himself over to studio ownership, but he ended up right where the star machine would have put him anyway. He was an unexpected bonus for Hollywood casting, a freebie. The irony would always be that, avoiding the star machine and the studio contract, Boyer nevertheless became as fixed in type as he would have been by submitting. The other effect was one he hated: For reasons no

one can trace or fully understand, nightclub comics and impersonators began doing “Boyer” by saying, “Come wiz me to zee Casbah,” a line never once uttered by Boyer in the film. (It’s an equivalent to the better-known “Play it again, Sam” problem from *Casablanca*.) Over his lifetime, this drove Boyer crazy, and he pointed out time and again, “I did *not* say that line!” Nevertheless, “Come wiz me to zee Casbah” did much to keep Charles Boyer in the public’s mind and on the official Hollywood roster of great movie stars.

After *Algiers*, Boyer embarked upon a lifetime of stardom in which he would play lovers. Lovers and lovers and lovers. He proves himself to be a master of romance. He can be honest and true, or kick it up a notch to become a cad who can be reformed, or kick it up yet another notch to be a cad who is cruel (*Gaslight*), and kick it over the top to do comedy. He has at least four tones on the romantic scale, from “sincere” to “gigolo” to “killer” to “caricature.” He could vary his lover first by playing him romantically, then as evil and manipulative. He could vary him further by adding a comic touch to it, and ultimately he could stamp it forever with its Gallic origins by playing elderly lovers who just appreciated women.

To American audiences, Charles Boyer seemed the perfect lover for many reasons, *Algiers* chief among them. But women also thought he was a gentleman. If he had been a gangsterish kind of lover back there in the old Casbah—if he had shoved a grapefruit in Lamarr’s face, or given her a quick Gable-ish once-over and a grin—his stardom might have had nowhere to go. But he had that gentlemanly quality, that elegance, that sense that he was offering his arm to a lady. He was an exotic French lover Americanized, democratized, and because of that, he seemed to be perfect to play *in support of* female movie stars.

Of course, Boyer had been perceived as good support for female stars earlier in his career. Now, as an authentic star, he was once again thought of as a perfect foil for a leading woman, and in the next woman he was cast with, he could not have been luckier. She was Irene Dunne. Dunne and Boyer would become one of Hollywood’s most popular teams, making three lovely films

together: *Love Affair* and *When Tomorrow Comes* in 1939, and *Together Again* in 1944.* Certainly they loved working together, and Boyer always thought of *Love Affair* as his favorite movie. For herself, Dunne narrowed her many leading men down to two favorites, Cary Grant and Charles Boyer, calling them very different types. In their personal lives, Boyer and Dunne, both devout Catholics, became lifelong friends.

Love Affair is a beloved classic, well directed by Leo McCarey, and with a wonderful screenplay by Donald Ogden Stewart and Delmer Daves (based on a story by Mildred Cram and McCarey). Unavailable for viewing for many years, it began to have a legendary status among fans, who always spoke of it with reverence. Restored to circulation in the 1990s, it did not disappoint, and it has been remade twice.† In its year of release, 1937, Irene Dunne was thirty-nine, and had been on top for about six years; Boyer was forty and in the midst of his biggest star surge. They weren't kids and they didn't have to pretend they were. They represented the best of what Hollywood could give to audiences in portraying a mature woman and a mature man.

Love Affair opens up on shipboard after a short sequence of news media establishing the playboy status of Boyer's character, Michel Marnet. Boyer enters the frame in a tuxedo, carrying a lighted cigarette, and Dunne enters in furs, pearls, and a long gown. They are the ultimate in sophisticated chic, witty self-confidence, and soigné manners. But that's just the characters they're playing. Dunne and Boyer as actors are even more: two successful stars at the top of their form, easily displaying their own glamorous personae. They're ever so easy with each other as they tease, challenge, flirt, and ultimately fall helplessly, honestly in love, despite the fact that both their characters are what used to be called "no better than they should be." Boyer admits he's never worked a day in his life, that he's just had a fling with his fiancée's best friend, and that his engagement to a very, very wealthy sausage heiress is, well, convenient. For her part, Dunne originally came from Kansas, had hoped to become a singer, but a wealthy sugar daddy had shown up

to drape the furs and the pearls on her, and, well, money counts, doesn't it?



With Irene Dunne (his most perfect match) in *Love Affair*

Dunne and Boyer are so utterly appealing that no one pays any attention to these character flaws—which the film *does* make clear yet ultimately treats lightly. Since both are on their way home to their meal-ticket significant others, they try to avoid the unavoidable. Yet they can't help themselves, and everything changes when they disembark in Porto Santo, Madeira, for four hours, and Boyer takes Dunne to meet his aging grandmother. She's played by that old ham actress Maria Ouspenskaya, who manages to pull off the idea that visiting her *could* change their lives forever. When Dunne and Boyer go into her chapel and awkwardly kneel—and ever more awkwardly cross themselves, almost with embarrassment—the sense that they are turning over the page to something new seems honest and deeply felt.



Boyer was a perfect co-star for actresses of all ages and types in movies that were dramatic or comic. ABOVE: With Rita Hayworth in *Tales of Manhattan* (shown also with Thomas Mitchell) ... BELOW: Bette Davis in *All This, and Heaven Too* ...





... Joan Fontaine in *The Constant Nymph*, and her rival for his affections, Alexis Smith.



Love Affair moves from a lighthearted screwball comedy about two people used to a life of pink champagne into a sad story about the accidental wrecking of the new life they plan to share after a six-month trial period. All ends well, of course, and in the scene in which they are reunited, Boyer's eloquent face reveals everything

he's been through as he figures out what happened to her (a crippling accident), which was even worse. (It's Irene Dunne's film, actually, but without Boyer, as was so often the case, her character would not have had the same depth. Dunne plays in a stiff-upper-lip, slightly brittle manner that doesn't seem shallow because Boyer himself demonstrates her contained grief and pain. Irene Dunne is wonderful, but she's dependent on Boyer's credibility as a previously defined desirable French lover to fill out her character's motivations.)

The success of *Love Affair* inspired the business to rush the two stars into a second co-starring feature. *When Tomorrow Comes*, brilliantly directed by John M. Stahl, is generally considered much less than *Love Affair*, but it's a fine movie. Today it enjoys a cult status, and in its own day it was Universal's top box office draw of the year. Dunne and Boyer are once again marvelous together, easy, natural, playing in an almost improvisational manner. The difference between this second hit and their first is that *When Tomorrow Comes* is definitely a melodramatic women's film without a happy ending. There is also a lack of glamour, in that Dunne plays a waitress with a limited wardrobe. The movie begins lightheartedly and descends into disappointment, providing both stars with acting challenges. She has to deliver lines such as "When I was a child back in the orphanage ..." and Boyer has to be on the Jack Nicholson end of the old routine in which he tries to order a slice of cheese that comes only *with* the apple pie. (Why did no one mention that *Five Easy Pieces* [1970], with its "hold the chicken salad, just give me the toast" routine, was recycling old-movie dialogue that had appeared in many films?)

In the end, they must give each other up, since Boyer is married to a crazy wife. They have a last romantic dinner together in a beautiful restaurant, and when Boyer gets up to leave for his ship (which sails at midnight as ships always do in romantic movies), he tells Dunne, "I'll be back in a little while." "I'll be waiting," she says. For once, a noble sacrifice seems real, because Dunne and Boyer make it so. *When Tomorrow Comes* proves the pairing of Dunne and Boyer in *Love Affair* was not a fluke.

These two 1939 movies not only present Boyer's established type but work by using it as a foundation. The audience accepts that the delicate Dunne, whether sophisticated or naïve, would want the great French lover for her own. It accepts that he's irresistible, whether a slight cad needing to be shaped up or a noble spirit who knows he mustn't be selfish.

By the end of the 1930s, Boyer had proved he could support Hollywood's biggest female stars. From *The Garden of Allah* in 1936 to *All This, and Heaven Too* in 1940, he was cast opposite Marlene Dietrich, Danielle Darrieux, Claudette Colbert, Jean Arthur, Hedy Lamarr, Michèle Morgan, Irene Dunne, and Bette Davis. He was excessive and mysterious with Dietrich, definitely French with Darrieux, lightly comedic with Colbert, solidly loving with Arthur, exotic with Lamarr, loyal with Morgan, romantically sophisticated with Dunne, and all-out dramatic with Davis. He truly seemed to love the women his co-stars were portraying. He was so effective, in fact, that he seemed to be loving his co-stars themselves. He gave everything he had to them, leaning in, listening, his soft eyes filled with responsive emotion and appreciation. Boyer was one male actor who really was willing to *support* his leading lady, to make his own characterization about *her*—how fascinating she was, how adorable, how beautiful, how sexy. In this regard, he was not only the consummate leading man but also the greatest supporting actor any movie could possibly have. An unnamed actress who played a supporting role in a Boyer film was quoted as having said, "I don't know of a woman who has made a picture with Charles Boyer without enjoying the experience. Women are comfortable with him, because they sense right away that their bodies are safe. He isn't hell-bent on screwing them ... Women become his friends because they trust him, and because of that trust, actresses play well with him. Whether he's being informal on a set, or acting for the camera, Charles does know how to handle women." His co-star was talking about Charles Boyer, the actor, but she was also describing how the women in the audience felt about him.

Boyer didn't always have an easy time offering this support, however. The opposite of Dunne, and perhaps Boyer's most

incompatible leading lady, was Bette Davis, with whom he appeared in *All This, and Heaven Too* (1940). Although he's billed as "co-star" and plays the romantic interest, the movie is a Bette Davis vehicle—it runs for more than twenty minutes before Boyer appears, and the story is all about Davis, who plays a poor little governess accused of murder. Boyer is heavy artillery assigned to the pop-gun level of support usually provided at Warners by George Brent.* But *All This, and Heaven Too* had serious aspirations to being a Best Picture. Oscar lust is written all over it, but at the bottom, it's just another women's film. Boyer raises it up, though. He represents Gallic heat in a dignified way that can get by the censors. He is George Brent, but crowned and elevated. He gives Davis's pain credibility. Since the story is one of unfulfilled love—she's a little hireling, he's a big duke with a wife and kids—the passion has to be muted. The result is a talky, dragged-out affair about two people who don't have the oomph to really do anything about their feelings. Davis plays it all noble and proper, low key and high minded. Without Boyer, who seems to seethe with something under the surface, the story wouldn't work at all.

Anatole Litvak, the director, was unhappy with the final movie. "The picture was overproduced," he said. "You couldn't see the actors for the candelabra ... Bette Davis was the world's most expensively costumed governess ... Somehow, though, Charles's performance transcended the curse of overproduction. He was easily the best actor I ever directed, although in the three pictures we made, I didn't direct him once. He was his own creative artist."

Because audiences so clearly believed that Boyer was irresistible, his type could credibly be reversed. Two movies in which Boyer successfully played bad lovers—one a cad, one a killer—are, respectively, *Hold Back the Dawn* (1940) and *Gaslight* (1944). In *Hold Back the Dawn*, Boyer's character narrates the story of how he seduced and married an innocent schoolteacher (Olivia de Havilland) in order to gain legal entry to the United States. The story is presented in flashback form, as "a Roumanian" (Boyer) first tricks his way into Paramount Studios and onto the set of 1941's *I Wanted Wings* (a real movie), under the alleged direction of Dwight

Saxon. Saxon is actually played by Mitchell Leisen, the real director of *I Wanted Wings* ... and also the director of *Hold Back the Dawn*. As “the Roumanian” interrupts Saxon to tell him his flashback story, the scene that is being shot involves the actress Veronica Lake, playing herself playing her character, while Brian Donlevy, one of her co-stars from *Wings*, plays himself watching her play that convoluted role. This Pirandellian effect works well, and it casts a meaningful shadow over Boyer’s performance, in which he, too, plays with his own filmed image.

As he explains his former life, Boyer says, he lived off rich women. He is honest but delicate in his wording. “My occupation was listed as ‘dancer’ ... if you had a deep voice and knew how to look at a woman ... it was an easy life.” He says little but tells everything. He admits he convinced de Havilland to marry him after having known him less than a day: “I had cast the crumbs of romance before a hungry heart. The trap was set.” This, in effect, is what Boyer’s movie persona does for American women. To play the *false* European lover, Boyer, the true European lover, is subtle. He doesn’t slobber over de Havilland. He doesn’t turn into Erik Rhodes in *The Gay Divorcée*. He doesn’t become a silly caricature, or spoil de Havilland’s performance of a woman who’s too intelligent to be taken in by such a creature but who’s also too naïve and too lonely to realize the subterfuge. Instead, he just puts a little extra body language on what, in another film, would have been his serious romantic dialogue.

In *Gaslight*, Boyer turns toward evil and is utterly convincing. This time, the audience is actually forced to re-evaluate his French charm. His behavior—so romantic, so loving—is called into question. What is he after? And the answer is sinister. *Gaslight* is first-class entertainment all the way. The young and radiantly beautiful Ingrid Bergman won an Oscar for playing the naïve creature he seduces, and the role is her very best performance. *Gaslight* is well directed by George Cukor, and the production values are tops. Sets, costumes, cast, lighting, music—everything is the best MGM had to offer, which means, really, the best Hollywood had to offer. The stars—Boyer, Bergman, and Joseph Cotten—are all placed

inside the frame in exactly the ways they were created, built, and hired to be. Boyer is handsome and charming. Bergman is beautiful and tenderly vulnerable. Cotten is intelligent and the Anglo anti-Boyer. The supporting cast includes the very young Angela Lansbury, superb as a tart of a maid, and Dame May Whitty at her dithery best.



Boyer's greatest role as a villain was opposite Ingrid Bergman in *Gaslight*, in which he played a suave man who had what it took to drive any woman crazy.

Boyer now does for Bergman what Lamarr did for him in *Algiers*: He authenticates her performance. If he were not the romantic seducer, audiences might question why she wasn't smart enough to see through him. In *Gaslight*, Boyer carefully conceals his cunning, letting it out of the bag slowly. It's when the newly married couple—wed after only two weeks of meeting—return home that Boyer's plan is put firmly into place. When he opens the door to the darkly shadowed No. 9 Thornton Square for his bride, he opens the door to

hell, a hell he creates and defines. “Now, Paula,” he says, ushering her in. At that moment begins a series of scenes of abject abuse and humiliation for her, but all done so simply, so logically, that she really does begin to look crazy in our eyes as well as her own. Slowly, in the guise of love, concern, and support, he drives her toward madness, making her believe she imagines things, loses things, forgets things. “You *are* inclined to forget things,” he tells her lovingly. “Am I?” she asks in surprise and confusion. If he is vaguely insulting to her and she protests, he charmingly, gently says, “I was teasing you, my dear.” Boyer’s humiliation of Bergman is both private and public. “Paula ... my watch is gone,” he whispers to her at an elegant musical soirée. Then he regretfully takes over her little purse, of course finding his watch secreted at its bottom. After she collapses in public, creating a scene, his concern for her—his good manners as he ushers her out, his loving willingness to cover up for her, his carefully controlled and publicly enacted expression of pain on her behalf—is terrifying.

The subtle change in Boyer’s character is carried out through costuming and props as well. His clothes become just that much more fashionable, even a tiny bit flashy. He starts smoking expensive-looking cigars and cigarillos. He preens a bit, easily gives orders to servants, sits down at her piano confidently. “I’m home free now,” his performance says. “It’s only a matter of time.” He handles a flirtation with Angela Lansbury like the very practiced seducer he is, wisely sizing her up for what *she* is, knowing he can have her if he wants, but also knowing there’s more at stake than a cheap roll in the hay. There’s just a touch of regret in his attitude toward her, as if to say, “If only I didn’t have bigger fish to fry. Ah, me.”

An actor has to own his type before he can reverse it. Because Boyer’s definition as an irresistible lover was so clear, so stabilized and accepted, it could be reversed with real credibility. Another actor in *Gaslight* couldn’t provide the same betrayal and couldn’t get us to accept that Bergman—a strong and healthy-looking woman—could be tricked this way. Boyer is playing from strength. We *believe* he’s a seducer, but we also believe him to be loyal, true, good. He’s

betraying his image to *us*, as well as betraying his promises to *her*. When Bergman finally figures out what's happening and turns the cruelty back on him, most women in the audience feel like cheering. *Gaslight* is an example of stardom being put to wider use than it was created to deliver.

In many ways Charles Boyer's longevity in American films is a fluke. Generally, Americans have a native suspicion of all things foreign—particularly French men—and logically this should have shoved Boyer either off the screen or at least into secondary roles. The moviegoing public hasn't taken much to French actors, at least not for very long. Maurice Chevalier had only a short career in early 1930s musicals,* and Louis Jourdan had a brief period as a leading man in the 1950s before returning to France. Francis Lederer, Jacques Bergerac, Fernand Gravet—even Jean-Paul Belmondo, Alain Delon, and Yves Montand—these men were popular in their time, but none of them ever became a real American movie star. (Belmondo and Delon were largely hits with Americans only in their French movies.) But Americans took to Boyer in a way they never did to any other actor from France, not even the great Jean Gabin. Often called “the Spencer Tracy of France” (when, in fact, Tracy might better be called “the Jean Gabin of America”), Gabin was an earthy male star who could both act and generate ambience. He was perhaps the greatest male movie star in France's history, a different type physically from Boyer, more of an ordinary guy than a gentleman. He was France's great figure of the 1930s, projecting a doomed pessimism, playing grumpy, working-class men who were allowed to reveal a gentle inner core. Some of his greatest and most successful French films were remade in America. (One was *Pépé le Moko*, which became *Algiers*.) When war broke out in Europe, Gabin made his way to America via Spain and Portugal. His mentor, director Julien Duvivier, was already in Hollywood, and helped secure Gabin a contract at 20th Century-Fox.

Gabin made two American movies, *Moontide* in 1942, opposite Ida Lupino, and *The Impostor* (1944), also called *Strange Confession*, which Duvivier directed. Neither film was a success, and Gabin had no illusions about it. “Not only did I not please myself,” he said,

“but I didn’t please the Americans.” He just wasn’t America’s idea of a Frenchman. French men were Charles Boyer! Gabin looked rough and low-down. He was more like a Warner Bros. tough guy than a Paramount sophisticate. Who needed him in America, where we grew our own tough guys?* The ads for *Moontide* show clearly no one quite knew how to present him. The poster features a portrait of Gabin, with “Aaaaahhhh, Jean Gabin” running in large type around his head. “More than a glamour boy,” reads the copy, “more than a muscle man ... more than a caveman... and ... he can do more with one glance than most stars can with ten pages of script.” Uncertainty has crept in. The poster also bills Gabin as “the star of *Grand Illusion* in his first American motion picture ...” The poster adds, “with Ida Lupino.” (Lupino was always given short shrift.)

Gabin’s stardom reflected his own appropriateness for the national mood of France in the prewar era, and after the war, when a boom of optimism prevailed, he was temporarily unfashionable. But he gradually reshaped his own persona into one of a tough man who would go it alone, control his own fate, and never be tempted by manipulative women. He became the ultimate French criminal, and when that phase wore out, he transformed himself into a respectable middle-class hero who was intelligent and mature in his wisdom. He evolved from decade to decade, reflecting current national attitudes each time he shifted his persona, finally becoming the archetypical Inspector Maigret in the movies. (Gabin’s career in France is a great example of how the rules of stardom function outside Hollywood.)

Part of Boyer’s longevity was due to the accident of timing that brought him to stardom during World War II, a time when any actor with an accent was in casting clover. (Elements such as luck—being in the right place at the right time—can never be forgotten in explaining stardom.) Boyer was foreign when Hollywood needed foreigners. Over the years, his English became clearer, but he wisely never let it get any better than it had to be. And he was humorous about it, saying, “I have only one accent, but I use it for Hungarian, Chinese, and Russian roles. American audiences are not particular about their accents, luckily for me. As long as my accent sounds

foreign, that is enough. And somehow my accent always manages to sound foreign.” Boyer, already established and respected in Hollywood, found some of his best and most varied roles during the war: *Back Street*, with Margaret Sullavan, in 1941; *The Constant Nymph*, with Joan Fontaine, in 1943; *Gaslight*, 1944; *Confidential Agent*, 1945; and *Cluny Brown* (1946), among others.

Boyer was smart. He knew he might get too old to be a romantic lover, but he’d always be French. He realized the stability possible because of his typecasting. In the late 1950s, he began to refuse roles that were sexy or that he considered too young for him. “I’m not against romantic roles,” he said, “if they are in my age group and if the love story is an adult one. But I’d be embarrassed to try, as some movie stars do, to look twenty years younger than I am. They fool no one—not even themselves. An actor should get away from romantic roles before they get away from him.” Thus, Boyer really *was* a great lover—one who knew when seduction wasn’t going to work. In fact, he often described himself as a character actor, and even claimed never to have played a seducer. “I don’t believe I have ever played a seducer or a great lover. I have played Napoleon. I have played professors and diplomats, artists and musicians. I once played a playboy who turns out to be all right, but a seducer, never!” This statement eliminates his *Gaslight* and *Mayerling* roles and negates his ability to make both his leading ladies and his female audiences fall completely in love with him. He denied his typecasting in the words of the true seducer, one to whom it comes naturally and who doesn’t think it’s a performance.

Boyer returned to Europe to make films in his later years, embracing an international stardom, and also found success on the Broadway stage (Sartre’s *Red Gloves*, 1948; *Don Juan in Hell*, 1950; *Kind Sir*, 1953; *The Marriage-Go-Round*, 1958). Like Loretta Young, he was forward looking enough to embrace the small screen of television early on, when most actors were leery of it. He became part of the Four Star Television Group, formed in 1951, the other three stars being Dick Powell, David Niven, and Ida Lupino (not a full partner). He also recorded songs and speeches, acted as a

narrator and guide for a news special on the Louvre, and collected rare books. (He was a lifelong avid reader.)

Boyer's personal life was also stable. The English actress he married in 1934, Pat Paterson, remained his wife until her death. His life's greatest tragedy was the suicide of his only child, Michael, who shot himself with a .38 caliber rifle on September 23, 1965, when he was almost twenty-one years old. The Boyers were devastated by the death. Friends who knew them well said they never really recovered.



Charles Boyer shortly before his suicide.

Near the end of his life, Boyer told an interviewer, "I believe I have learned control. I stay within my own frame emotionally and psychologically." He had a chance to prove it. When his beloved Pat died on August 24, 1977, he was at her bedside, holding her hand, just as he would have been had their love story been a Charles Boyer movie. He explained to all their friends that he would not be attending her funeral services, even though he had carefully made all the plans himself. While mourners were listening to her eulogy, Boyer sorted out his papers, straightened up their home, and put all

their effects in order. The very next day, two days short of his seventy-ninth birthday, he committed suicide by taking an overdose of barbiturates. His obituaries all described him as a great French lover who was willing to die for his beloved offscreen as well as on.

WILLIAM POWELL



William Powell

William Powell and Charles Boyer have a lot in common: big eyes, melodious voices, rather large noses, unflappable poise, and the ability to play comedy and tragedy equally well. Both provided decades of impeccable support for the beautiful leading ladies of Hollywood. Where Boyer is French and deeply romantic, Powell is American and very sassy, although Boyer could be cynical and Powell could be loving. Powell could spar with beautiful women in a charming way, seeming to be the perfect romantic foil without

looking mean. He could toss off any line with an improvisational quality. He could wear expensively tailored clothes and look casual and relaxed. He could be a likable good guy, but he could also convey a touch of larceny, a slight sense of criminality, and get away without seeming a villain. Since he had a zippy soupçon of naughtiness beneath his surface, he became more famous for comedy than for drama, but despite his often hilarious shenanigans on film, Powell's ultimate persona was that of a gentleman. Maybe a gentleman sleuth. Maybe a gentleman jewel thief. Maybe a gentleman cad. Maybe a gentleman's gentleman. But a gentleman.

However, William Powell is always the anti-gentleman gentleman. He's the one who floats easily inside proper society while elegantly thumbing his nose at the concept, always just a little bit suspect in the society swim. In *Another Thin Man* (1939), a suspicious gate guard at a Long Island estate refuses Powell entrance, sneering that "He looks like a pool room dude." And so he does, but he's a pool room dude who can look good in silk pajamas, steer a woman through a crowded room, and stare anyone down. Powell's the master of the nonchalant stroll—hands in pockets, eyes fixed on some goal known only to him, pretending to listen to whatever drivel is being spoken to him, and managing to make it seem as if it really mattered. The audience knows it doesn't. He is super-casual, yet always on top of the action. If, as in a *Thin Man* movie, a flustered maid enters the posh dining room where he's a guest at a sit-down dinner for eight, to say, "The swimming pool is on fire," Powell doesn't even raise an eyebrow. He just handles the situation. He's the McCoy.

Like Charles Boyer, William Powell had a long and stable movie career. Also like Boyer, he did not have to be "developed" by the star machine and yet he succeeded because he located his perfect "type." The two actors came to movies with solid experience in theatre and silent films, and they were not kids when they became successful. Boyer made his first silent film when he was twenty-one, and was thirty-six when he fully "arrived" with *Private Worlds* in 1935. Powell was thirty when he debuted in movies in 1921, and he broke through to the very top by 1934 when he was forty-two.

When the time came, both men knew they should give up romancing actresses young enough to be their daughters. Both slid gracefully over to playing character roles, with Powell retiring before anything embarrassing could happen to his career, just as any gentleman would.

Throughout his career, Powell played with grace every role assigned him. Bad boy or good, comedy or drama, he danced through the action. He could play a perfect drunk, holding his balance just tight enough, just loose enough, to make it realistic. He could do slapstick worthy of Mack Sennett. He could look yearningly at a woman and seem to be truly in love with her, and he could deliver speeches about important issues and reveal depth of emotions for drama. As with Fred Astaire, nothing could ever diminish his elegance, but he was casual about it. Powell was one of the boys. He might be in a tuxedo or holding a martini glass, but he was just a guy. This is why he was perfect as Nick Charles, the “guy” detective who married money but kept his criminal pals close. They were his “boys” and he was one of them, just richer and better dressed.

William Powell remained in the movie business for over three decades. His first movie was a bit part in *Sherlock Holmes* (1922), the Goldwyn version starring John Barrymore, and his last was in 1955 (*Mister Roberts*). In between he made approximately ninety-four films. In silent days, he was on his way to becoming typecast as a fairly commonplace villain when two things happened. First, Josef von Sternberg used him in *The Last Command* and *The Dragnet* in 1928, seeing something in him that lifted him out of the ordinary. Second, sound came in. And if there was one thing William Powell could do it was talk, and not only talk, but sass, woo, cajole, and cuddle with his voice. Although many have made the point that sound was the major influence on Powell’s stardom, David Thomson said it best: “It is a commentary on the artistic consequences of sound that, without altering his screen character, articulacy made Powell more appealing—the lofty, well-mannered cad.” In other words, what looked menacing without words became charming with smart dialogue added.

In fact, it can be said that sound—not the star machine—made both Boyer and Powell stars. The sound of their voices, their cadences, their rhythms, their special dictions, took them out of potential villainry and over to heroism. For Boyer, keeping out of any one studio's clutches helped, whereas for Powell, putting himself in those same clutches worked. Powell was lucky with studios. He began at Paramount, shifted to Warner Bros., and ended up at MGM—arriving at each at just the right moment in his career development. Each studio contributed to developing his type and making him famous.

Powell signed with Paramount in 1926 having already established himself as an effective silent film villain in such movies as *When Knighthood Was in Flower* (1922), *Bright Shawl* (1923), and *Romola* (1924). The studio cast him in his first sound film, 1929's *Interference*, Paramount's official first "all-talking" movie. Because it was the studio's foray into the new medium, the film was given particular scrutiny by critics, fans, and everyone in Hollywood. As its leading man, Powell came into focus, and he was good, playing a noble victim of circumstances. Learning that he's going to die from an incurable heart disease, Powell murders the woman he once had an affair with to prevent her from blackmailing his ex-wife about their relationship. Everyone noticed him, and the *Boston Herald* nailed down why: "His cultivated and expressive voice, his smooth, polished manner and easy assumption of emotion masked under flippant cynicism, made him the outstanding person in the cast." It's a description of Powell's strengths and performance style that could cover the rest of his career. The only thing that would change was that he would stop murdering people and start chasing murderers. And it happened in his very next film.

Most people think that *The Thin Man* series, in which Powell starred as detective Nick Charles, defined Powell's type. No, it merely confirmed it. The reality is that William Powell was Nick Charles on-screen before he was Nick Charles on-screen. In 1929, immediately following his success in *Interference*, William Powell was cast as the amateur detective Philo Vance, a beloved character from a series of best-selling novels by S. S. Van Dine. Vance

epitomized the gentleman sleuth. He just wasn't named Nick Charles. And he wasn't married to anyone named Nora. Philo Vance was suave. He was superbly tailored. He traveled among the rich and frivolous. He romanced beautiful women, and he solved complicated crimes involving dogs, parrots, racetracks, and singing canaries who were really gangster's molls. And he was witty, fast with a line. Powell was later cast as Nick Charles because he had been so well cast as Philo Vance.

Powell's first Vance movie was *The Canary Murder Case*. In reviewing it, *Variety* called him "the number-one name in the talker field" and Paramount knew it had a successful star who wouldn't have to be remodeled in any way whatsoever. Between 1929 and mid-1931 Powell made twelve more movies for the studio, among them two more appearances as Philo Vance (*The Greene Murder Case* in 1929 and *The Benson Murder Case* in 1930). He also made the movie that many experts think solidified his stardom, *Street of Chance* (1930), in which he played a role based on real-life New York gambler Arnold Rothstein. Supported by Kay Francis and Jean Arthur, Powell made a star turn out of his "chance." The movie was the brainchild of producer David O. Selznick, who personally cast both Powell and Francis in their roles, and who insisted that the movie have an authentic tragic ending in which Powell is killed by violating his own code of criminal conduct. The movie was a personal favorite of Selznick's, who always called it the movie "that made William Powell a star."

Street of Chance was one of six Powell features released in 1930, after which he demanded a vacation and took off for Europe. Upon return, he made two final films for Paramount, both in 1931 and both of which starred him with his soon-to-be wife, Carole Lombard: *Man of the World* and *Ladies' Man*.*

Powell was happy at Paramount. However, his agent, Myron Selznick, brother of David, negotiated an amazing and lucrative new contract for him that changed Powell's life. Putting together a package of Powell, Kay Francis, and Ruth Chatterton (three stars he represented), Selznick sold them to Warner Bros., who desperately needed star personalities who could "talk" for their new roster of

sound movies. In 1933, Powell moved to Warners for \$6,000 per week plus story approval—an unusual perk that certified he was a top-drawer star. At Warners the emerging aspects of Powell's character type were further defined and strengthened. He emerged as a true leading man, with a touch of the down-to-earth, a dash of the acerbic, and a full dollop of the romantic.

His first Warners film, 1931's *The Road to Singapore* (not to be confused with the Bob Hope–Bing Crosby *Road* movie of the same name, made in 1941), reveals who Powell had already become on film at Paramount. It's actually a flimsy little film, but Powell's presence is distinctive and definitely the “Philo Vance” William Powell. The movie opens up in the Gymkhana Club, with lots of British types pip-pipping and tallyhoing around. Mostly they're gossiping with a great deal of smug satisfaction and “it's about time”s about Powell's as yet unseen character, who has just been thrown out of the club. Watching this scene, an audience understands several things: First, this is the traditional “star entrance” buildup before the lead actor is seen; second, these people are all wrong about him; and third, nevertheless we're supposed to take their disapproval seriously. The actors' stilted performances, some of which are satirical stereotypes, establish a “norm” of societal attitude that defines the universe of the movie. And it's that world of snobbery, restriction, and prudery that William Powell will deflate. When we have our first glimpse of the leading man, he's on an ocean liner, half-drunk but well turned out in a tuxedo, sitting at a bottle-laden table in the elegant ship's salon. He's a breath of fresh air (however gin-soaked), lifting the movie away from the stilted British stereotypes and stiff performances. He seems real, because he plays realistically in natural speech patterns and rhythms. He is loose, mocking and ironic in the midst of a world of false good manners, clipped speech, and narrow attitudes. William Powell is providing that essential star-making direct connection to the audience. He presents himself as an outsider to riches, even though he's rich. He's “outside” by choice, which viewers found reassuring. His cynical attitude toward the norm offers a criticism that the American audience could easily embrace. For anyone who might

wonder how a man like Powell, with his elegant clothes, his mustache and martini, could ever become a popular movie star, *The Road to Singapore* lays it all out. His character seems to say to any viewer, "I am one of you. I inhabit this universe of wealth and snobbery to entertain you, but you and I both know it's a load of clams." Powell puts on the Ritz though we know he can live without it.

Singapore's Powell is not a comedy character, but there's much that's comic in his delivery. Playing a cad with women, he takes a frustrated wife onto the dance floor, executes a perfect tango worthy of Valentino, then sweeps her out onto the terrace and into a chair. She's breathless, clearly feeling the effect of his sexual power. "Well," he asks with a bored air, lighting up the inevitable cigarette, "am I living... *down* ... to my reputation?" His best scene comes near the end when an angry husband (Louis Calhern) confronts him with a gun, threatening to shoot him for stealing his wife. Powell, standing in front of a mirror, has just dressed in his best tuxedo. Hearing the news that he's about to die, he whips out a whisk broom and starts brushing his jacket. "Well," he says, "do you mind if I finish? I have a horror of an undertaker dressing me. I've never known one yet who could tie a bow correctly." Calhern is rendered speechless by this, and then suffers the final humiliation of seeing the man who cuckolded him sashay calmly out the door. As he breezes by, Powell tells the desperate husband a bunch of things that add up to "I'm taking your wife, you dope, and if you want to shoot me, go ahead. I've made up my mind." Calhern slumps against the wall, still aiming his pistol, while Powell pauses in the doorway, waiting. Nothing happens, so he lights a cigarette and swans out, presumably on his way to the lady. This is William Powell's Nick Charles type in full flower. All he needs is a highball and a dog on a leash.*

The Kennel Murder Case was Powell's final appearance as Philo Vance, and *Variety's* review demonstrates how much he was associated with the role of private detective: "William Powell, whose experience as a screen criminologist is second to none ... gives his customary clever, suave presentation of Vance." The film,

well directed and paced by Michael Curtiz, co-starred Powell with the beautiful young Mary Astor. Take away his character's name, Philo Vance, and substitute Nick Charles—and replace Mary Astor with Myrna Loy—and you have a *Thin Man* movie, albeit not quite as lavishly appointed and not quite as loaded with sassy dialogue.

In *The Key* (1934), also a serious movie and his last film at Warners, Powell is given a speech that perfectly defines a certain type of male character of the era: “I’m a professional hero, ready to fight for money, marbles, or my meals. In fact, for anything but an ideal.” This statement covers many of Hollywood’s most famous male characters, from Rick in *Casablanca* to Rhett in *Gone with the Wind* to Han Solo in *Star Wars* (1977). He can be redeemed by love, which will bring to the surface his inherent patriotism, decency, morality, charity, whatever. These men are willing to sacrifice themselves if necessary, letting a “better” man walk off with the girl, as Bogart does with Bergman, or walk off alone, as Gable does in *Gone with the Wind*. (Powell also does this in *The Key*.) This is the shape of the male sacrifice in movies, as compared to the female one to be found in women’s films. It is fundamentally the role of gentleman.

The Key was released in early 1934, the seminal year for Powell’s fame. He was riding high at Warners, but the studio was undergoing financial problems. National theatre attendance, having soared during the first years of the Depression, suddenly started to sag. Warners, the cheapest of the studios, prudently began to cut costs. Never the studio to care about its acting talent as much as it should have, it began to cut star salaries. Powell was informed that his weekly pay would be reduced from \$6,000 to \$4,000. He refused to cooperate. Warners had Powell’s up-and-coming lineup of films ready: He was about to make another Philo Vance film, *The Dragon Murder Case* (1934). Instead, he was replaced by Warren William and released from his contract. It had been agreed that the accompanying publicity announcement would indicate that Powell had chosen to go freelance, but Warners later let the fan magazines know the truth.

In retrospect, it was the best thing that ever happened to Powell. Studios fought to sign him to long-term deals. But before that could happen, David O. Selznick grabbed him for a one-picture deal at MGM, to play the second male lead in *Manhattan Melodrama*. The enormous success of the movie, and Powell's contribution to it, so impressed MGM that they then signed Powell to a long-term contract. He would remain at Metro (although he was occasionally loaned out) for the bulk of his career, becoming a fixture at the studio with the most star prestige.*

In 1934, Powell would appear in three MGM movies: *Manhattan Melodrama*, *The Thin Man*, and *Evelyn Prentice*: a gangster film, a murder mystery that helped define the screwball comedy, and a melodramatic women's film. (*The Key*, in which he had been a soldier of fortune in war-torn Dublin, was also released in 1934.) *Manhattan Melodrama* is famous for being the movie that John Dillinger attended the night he was gunned down outside the Biograph Theatre in Chicago, having been betrayed by the notorious "lady in red." It should also be famous as a classic example of a movie in which movie stars are effectively used. MGM cast two solid male stars: Clark Gable, their machine-made leading man, and William Powell, a newcomer to them who was going to become one of the best bonuses they ever had. Gable had reached the very top, having just made *It Happened One Night*, which would bring him the Oscar, and Powell's successes at Warner Bros. had fully defined him. They are both in their prime, looking good and feeling self-confident.

The story concerns two little boys who lose their parents to a fire on a Hudson River excursion boat in 1904. (A young Mickey Rooney plays Clark Gable as a child.) They are adopted by a man from their neighborhood who has lost his own son and wife in the same disaster. (This "adoption" sparks an interesting conversation. When the man makes the offer to the two boys, Rooney says to him, "I'm not a Jew and neither is Jim [Powell]." The man answers, "Catholic, Protestant, Jew, what does it matter now?") This man also dies when the boys are small, after challenging the oration of a soapbox communist. By claiming America is wonderful, the old man sparks a

riot, and he is trampled in the ensuing rush. (It was tough days in a 1930s plot.)

The boys grow up to be Gable and Powell, with Gable a notorious gambler and gangster and Powell the district attorney who is elected governor. Gable was often cast as a gambler. Like Powell, his type was also a man living outside normal societal constraints, but his “outsider” status was shaped for women—he offered sex outside the marriage bed. Gable at this point looks entirely the way Gable is supposed to look. He has the trademark mustache, the lopsided grin, the squinty eyes that crinkle up to assess a woman’s availability. His hair falls charmingly across his forehead, and his ears really do stick out. (Somehow this makes him more attractive, more real.) Powell is also on top of who he’s supposed to be. He’s intelligent, suave, smooth-spoken, and witty. Although Powell’s role is that of the good guy, he’s still allowed scenes with Myrna Loy (Loy’s character, Gable’s girl, ends up marrying Powell) in which they exchange witty repartee, à la their Nick and Nora roles.*

The film is essentially an old-fashioned story about a good kid and a bad kid who grow up to be a good man and a bad man—but the bad man is noble and teaches something about life to the good man. Without Clark Gable and William Powell to embody these roles, *Manhattan Melodrama* would be nothing. It’s a movie that reveals why stars were developed, and how stars were used ... to elevate ordinary material, to spin gold out of straw. With Gable and Powell in the frame, the film gains real glamour, resonance, and pizzazz. Gable ramps up his ordinary gangster role, creating a devil-may-care roué whose advice to a pal is, “Die the way you live—all of a sudden.” One of his final acts before going to his execution is to send a “black nightgown” over to “Toots Malone at her hotel room ... she’s always wanted one.” When Powell tries to commute Gable’s sentence, he snarls, “Hey, where do you get off, commuting me? ... If I can’t live the way I want, then at least let me die *when* I want.” The dash and flash of Gable are exciting, and well balanced by the inner power and calm of Powell, who takes on a role that, played by anyone else, would have been an unsympathetic prig. He turns it

into a charmer who gains audience sympathy. In their final scene together in Gable's jail cell, the two boyhood friends look at each other and try to say good-bye. Both underplay, drawing on the audience's understanding of the types they represent.

Powell's next film was *The Thin Man* (1934), a typical studio product, made quickly and rather cheaply—a movie that everyone expected to be successful but no one expected to become what it became, and certainly one that no one expected to be a beloved movie more than seventy years later. Powell's casting as the leading character—Dashiell Hammett's detective Nick Charles—seemed at the time to be not much more than a rip-off of his Philo Vance success.



The Charles family at home, facing the “What’s for dinner?” question: Asta, Nick, and Nora; a.k.a. Skippy (Asta’s real name), William Powell, and Myrna Loy, from *The Thin Man*.

Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's star machine made the *very* shrewdest assessments of actors for type. They understood that Powell was already a star and didn't need defining or fixing up. He was already Nick Charles, so it took no genius on their part to cast him that way. Dashiell Hammett's detective Nick Charles *was* the perfect movie character for Powell.* Charles is rich because he married rich and a detective because he has maintained his connections to the underworld. Thus, "Charles"/Powell can have it all—Long Island estates, ritzy nightclubs, furs and diamonds for his wife—and also a roster of former convicts, current gangsters, and permanent hoods. The latter legitimize him as not being a snob.

The Thin Man was studio product, nothing more, but with all systems go. MGM assigned the direction to their ever-reliable "house" man, W. S. "Woody" Van Dyke, and scheduled the film for a quick shooting, a quick postproduction process, and a rapid release into theatres. To support Powell, a cast of characters were put together all to be played by top names: Maureen O'Sullivan, Nat Pendleton, Minna Gombell, Porter Hall, Henry Wadsworth, Cesar Romero, Edward Brophy, and many others. For his leading lady, Powell was once again given Myrna Loy, as the two had meshed well in *Manhattan Melodrama*. The source material, the Hammett novel of the same name, was adapted for the screen by the first-rate writing team of Albert Hackett and Frances Goodrich.

The *Thin Man* series is unique in movie history. As Leonard Maltin has pointed out, the *Thin Man* movies were "one series that stands apart from the others: its episodes were filmed two and three years apart, and its stars were those of the major rank, and the films were not looked down on as Grade-B efforts." Today most people know Powell—if they know him at all—as Nick. Powell and Loy co-starred in six movies based on the Nick and Nora Charles characters from 1934 to 1947. The five movies that followed the original took the Charleses forward in life as well as mystery: They have a son, he gets older, they go to Nick's hometown to visit his family, et cetera. All the films are good, and no one else ever played the roles of Nick and Nora in the movies.*

At the heart of the original movie was an ultramodern married relationship. (The screenwriters were married to each other, and not enough credit has gone to them for creating the witty, sparring, modern couple whose marriage worked as opposed to the competitive and frequently destructive relationship between Dashiell Hammett and Lillian Hellman.) In the depth of the Depression, Nick and Nora had clothes, money, cars, and plenty of pizzazz. Watching Powell swan around nonchalantly in the *Thin Man* movies explains why no one can make screwball comedies today. It's not, as everyone supposes, that they can't write them; it's that there's no one to play in them. Powell fills the frame, but without seeming even to care that he's in it. While players all around him are chewing up the scenery, their entire performances coming out of their mouths, Powell cocks an ear, leans casually forward, stuffs his hands in his pockets, raises an eyebrow, and steals the show.

There is no actor today who can pull off Powell's elegant thumbing of the nose at society while maintaining the sense of a man who can be counted on, a loyal, loving husband and father, but, still, a dude, an outsider. And no one can toss off a line like Powell. After Nick and Nora have a son, Charles is asked, "What's the big idea of the kid?" He replies, "We have a dog ... and he was lonesome." He turns to Loy. "That was the big idea, wasn't it, Mommy?" His cadence is perfect. His emphasis impeccable. He often delivers his dialogue with his head tilted back, his chin up, sometimes swinging his body side to side. In *Another Thin Man*, he makes a small half-twirl toward Loy after their Long Island weekend has descended into a murderous hell, and semi-whispers in a sing-y little challenge, "How do you like our peaceful weekend so far?"

Nick and Nora Charles are remembered as a smart, sophisticated couple who drink martinis and solve murders, and that is indeed who they are. But Nick Charles is also a domesticated man. Without William Powell, the *Thin Man* series could have disintegrated into Blondie and Dagwood with murders. Not only does he become a father, but in *The Thin Man Goes Home* (1944) he has a mom and a dad and the dad doesn't approve of him. Powell and Loy take the

train back to Sycamore Springs, the small town where Nick Charles grew up. His dad's a doctor and his mom bakes. The Charles homestead is a big old house with a fireplace and a giant kitchen. It's filled with knickknacks and chintz and ruffles on the curtains. There's a grandfather clock, chenille bedspreads, and a hammock out in the yard. (How clever was it to create an ordinary small-town background for Nick Charles? It's unexpected, and slightly embarrassing—a perfect contrast for William Powell to play off while Myrna Loy looks bemused but fits in perfectly, better than her husband does.) The Charles parents are well enough off but not sophisticated. Mom shouts, “Hilda! Bring the coffee in here!” when she wants coffee served in the living room. (There's no ringing a dainty little bell.) There's something satisfying about seeing the dapper Powell wearing sneakers, his old school letter sweater, and a shirt that says “Sycamore Springs High School.” He lounges in the hammock reading a Nick Carter Detective mystery magazine, while Nora struggles to set up a lawn chair and he ignores her efforts. (She points out how good an idea that is, because if he helped he “might get all sweaty and die.”)

Nick is still cool and elegant, but his parents are critical of him. His father puts him down. He has never once visited his son in New York and definitely disapproves of his drinking and his lifestyle (but not, of course, of his fabulous wife). Hollywood was business sharp. The 1930s were over, and the series had been around a while when *The Thin Man Goes Home* was released. By taking Nick out of the bars and nightclubs of Manhattan and sending him back to his small-town roots, the series connected Powell/“Charles” to the 1940s small-town audiences. Since many of them didn't have Dad's approval either, it all worked well. It was a bold and clever move—letting people see where Nick Charles came from and managing to make it funny while it subtly established the original source of his rebellion and his desire to become a sophisticated urbanite. However, it required an actor who could go there, be there, and not lose himself, and Powell can hold his place no matter what the setting. (Needless to say, Nick solves a murder as a bonus.)

After the first *Thin Man*, Powell was fully established at MGM as their go-to guy for the elegant gentleman in any genre. He alternated between comedies and dramas, and the studio also loaned him out to Universal for one of his greatest movies, *My Man Godfrey*, in 1936. *Godfrey* is one of Hollywood's most popular 1930s screwball comedies. Never shrill and always funny, it's a Depression-era story that holds up over time. Godfrey is living in a city dump when a brainless heiress (Carole Lombard) offers him five dollars to be her "forgotten man" in a society scavenger hunt. When Powell becomes Lombard's butler, her family's screwball antics never undo his cool, even when Mischa Auer, her mother's protégée, does gorilla imitations. The movie hit the perfect balance between serious issues and screwball antics, and not only was it a gigantic hit, but it was nominated for Oscars in the categories of Best Actor (Powell), Best Actress (Lombard), Best Supporting Actor (Auer), Best Supporting Actress (Alice Brady, as the nutcake mother), Best Direction (Gregory La Cava), and Best Screenplay (Eric Hatch and Morrie Ryskind). No one won, but the nomination officially sealed the Philo Vance/Nick Charles elegantly cool customer type for William Powell. The Academy had endorsed him in the role: He was Godfrey Vance Charles. William Powell had found and secured his type forever, a type that could fit in anywhere, in any era, and could be played by him at any age. He was set for his acting life.

After *Godfrey*, MGM quickly brought Powell "back home" to make their own wildly successful screwball hit. *Libeled Lady* (1936) stars Powell, Loy, Spencer Tracy, and Jean Harlow—enough star wattage to light the state of Texas. All four are wonderful, and despite what might seem to be a set of actors who could contradict one another, the mix is terrific. Tracy is allowed to be tricky and conniving, a nice opposite to his noble priest in *San Francisco* that same year, Harlow is allowed to be both trashy and appealing, and Loy and Powell, of course, portray their established roles. Their playful needling of each other is right out of the *Thin Man* movies, but taken out of the marital status and into a sparring courtship.

In *Libeled Lady*, Powell performs one of his best acts of comedy, a masterful example of the extended physical play he was capable of.

The situation is simple: He's got to hook a fish to impress Loy's wealthy father, whose only obsession is catching "Old Wall Eye." Powell's famous fishing scene in *Libeled Lady* gives him the kind of acting test that the stars of the past had to be up to—an extended physical sequence that should look easy, move the plot forward, and make the audience laugh. Since he is a cynical newspaperman whose usual tools of sport are the cocktail shaker and the cigarette lighter, he's first got to learn how to fish. Powell knows just what to do: He'll take fly fishing lessons in his hotel room, ending up bagging a lamp, the curtains, and Jean Harlow's rear. Then he sets out to impress the rich girl he's really trying to land (Loy) and her sportsman father (Walter Connolly). First, he wields the rod and reel with all the ineptitude of Laurel and Hardy, and then he ultimately triumphs, presumably because he's William Powell and can never really lose his sang- froid. He battles "Old Wall Eye" in a perfect physical dance of comedy action. Powell does what *he* does. He keeps cool and hangs on, acting as if he's in full control. He's a gentleman even when he's at the mercy of a fish.



For more than two decades, William Powell was an actor who could play it straight or play it funny with any actress of his era: with the fashion plate Kay Francis as doomed lovers in *One Way Passage*



... as a Jeeves with sex appeal opposite Carole Lombard in *My Man Godfrey* ...



... paired with the woman he was going to marry until her untimely death, Jean Harlow, in *Reckless*



with Franchot Tone on the right) ... and charmed by Hedy Lamarr in *The Heavenly Body*.

One of the routine comedies Powell made for Metro, *I Love You Again* (1940), shows how clearly he had mastered his type. The story mines that tired old staple of desperate screenwriters—the amnesia plot. Amnesia was a “we can’t figure out what to do” fallback for movie plots, suitable for drama (*Random Harvest* [1942]), film noir (*Somewhere in the Night* [1946]), and countless comedies, among them Powell’s turn with Loy in *I Love You Again*. Given the required bump on the head, Powell’s Milquetoast character wakes up as William Powell—a sassy con man with a strong libido. He then finds out that his “other self” was a repressed teetotaling cheapskate married to Myrna Loy, who is wisely trying to divorce him. As the silly plot unfolds, Powell is remarkable. He sits up in bed with an ice bag on his head, “forcing” himself to down a slug of scotch (his “medicine”). He hits his high point of sophistication on the dance floor, after Loy refuses to be his partner. He suavely says, “Well, I guess I’ll just have to dance by myself,” and he takes the floor, executing a perfect routine with empty arms.

The high point of his slapstick tradition (which some might feel is the low point of his oeuvre) comes when he finds out that his former self is the head of the Boy Rangers. Forced to don his uniform and lead the brats into the forest, he is given a surprise reward—the Brown Beaver. Solemnly, Powell tells the boys, “When I came out here this afternoon, about the last thing I expected was to get the beaver.” For his deadpan delivery of this line alone, Powell deserved his stardom. In and of itself, it’s not such a funny line, but Powell loads it up with innuendo, sarcasm, and all the bored but gracious acceptance of banality that shaped his charm, connected him to his viewers, and kept him on the screen for nearly thirty years.*

Powell’s character in *I Love You Again* is clearly a con artist, a cheat, and a liar, a guy who’s willing to take advantage of a beautiful woman who thinks he’s her husband. (And, since he actually *is* her husband, censorship couldn’t restrain him.) Warned by his sidekick (Frank McHugh) that he’s getting entirely too involved with Loy, Powell smugly states his philosophy regarding women: “Just because a man takes off his shoes and socks to go wading doesn’t mean he’s planning to swim the Atlantic.” In another actor’s voice, without Powell’s wry charm, a line like that could be offensive, but as Myrna Loy said, “[Powell] had great style and class and breeding.” There were actors in movies who had clothes and mustaches and coattails and witty lines, but they weren’t William Powell. As Loy went on to say, “There’s just nobody like him, and there’s never been anybody quite like him.” Perhaps the most perceptive remarks about him came from Loy, a woman of intelligence. She pointed out something no one else ever quite pinned down. “He has, mixed through it, that wild humor which comes from his Irishness.” There *is* a sense of wildness under Powell’s surface. It takes the form of a humorous barb brilliantly aimed, or a quirky remark that makes fun of the action, or a crazy little dance he sometimes does, or the questioning tilt of his head. Powell is holding himself together the way a gentleman should, on behalf of society. But society needs to watch out. He’s on the alert.

One of Powell's most famous roles of the 1930s was in one of his duller films, the elephantine *The Great Ziegfeld*, in 1936. He manages to make Ziggy somewhat fascinating by playing him as just a different kind of detective, one who is out searching wittily and cleverly for talent instead of murderers. (He was so closely associated with the role that he was asked to repeat it in *Ziegfeld Follies* in 1946.) Because he is usually thought of as being paired with Myrna Loy,* it's often forgotten how easily he adjusted to play opposite other great female movie stars. With Joan Crawford, he was a tad tougher, and with Jean Arthur a tad funnier. He managed to be "right" for Luise Rainer, Hedy Lamarr, Kay Francis, Rosalind Russell, Jean Harlow, Irene Dunne, and Lauren Bacall.



A signature role for William Powell as Flo Ziegfeld in *The Great Ziegfeld*, shown here with Esther Muir (to his left), and to his right, Fanny Brice, playing herself.



Powell received an Oscar nomination for his role as Clarence Day in *Life with Father*, also starring Irene Dunne (as his wife) and the lovely young Elizabeth Taylor as a visitor who captures everyone's attention.

Powell seemed to sidestep the problem of aging. For one thing, he hadn't been all that young when his stardom began, so he didn't seem to change. He was also lucky in finding good roles that suited his age. In 1947, when he was fifty-five, he played in the satiric *The Senator Was Indiscreet* as a politician with a tell-all diary, and in *Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid* (1948), he played the appropriate role of a middle-aged man going through a crisis about getting older. He was a straying husband in *Take One False Step* (1947) and willingly accepted the role of the father in *The Girl Who Had Everything* (1953). His daughter was the young and luscious Elizabeth Taylor. In *Girl*, Powell undertook a role originally played by Lionel Barrymore when the movie was first made as *A Free Soul* (with Norma Shearer as the daughter).^{*} Powell, billed third after Taylor and Fernando Lamas, looks fantastic: trim, flat-stomached, loose-limbed.



William Powell retired at the top of his game, with one of his final features giving him a chance to have offscreen fun with such co-stars as James Cagney, Ward Bond, Jack Lemmon, and (*at bottom of photo*) Henry Fonda. Powell is shirtless, whipping up some chow for the gang of *Mr. Roberts*.

The best role of his later years—and said to be his favorite movie—was his 1947 Oscar-nominated lead as Clarence Day in *Life with Father*, opposite Irene Dunne. His performance is delightful, a kind of summing-up of all the Powell attributes. He's funny, charming, acerbic, bombastic, impossible, lovable, romantic, and kind—all in one. It was his last hurrah in the Oscar pool and, sadly, he lost out to Ronald Colman for his fine performance in *A Double Life* (1947). Both men were worthy, and both had waited a lifetime for the award. Some have found it strange that Powell had begun to play fathers, forgetting, perhaps, that Nick Charles was a father. Yes, Charles was the kind of father who took his son out for a walk on a pretext so he could visit his bookie, but, still, he was a father. In some ways, the irascible Clarence Day à la William Powell was Nick Charles in period costume and color, with no mystery to solve and a lot more kids to raise.

Powell's final two films were both highly successful projects: *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953) and *Mister Roberts* (1955). In both he was as graceful as he had always been, and his presence elevated the material. Following *Mister Roberts*, Powell retired from the screen. He had survived a bout with colon cancer in the late 1930s, and having found happiness with his third wife, the former actress Diana "Mousey" Lewis, he was happy to lead a life of leisure in Palm Springs. He was never tempted to return to the business he had succeeded in for nearly thirty-five years.

Powell's success is remarkable in that he was a studio actor yet managed to almost totally evade the star machine's publicity mill. For a time during the 1930s, however, Powell was written about and pictured in fan magazines because of his romances with Carole Lombard and Jean Harlow. By the end of that decade, he was almost never covered. He didn't need it and didn't want it. He was past the age of glamour boy, and not the type that was in vogue. One of the last flurries of publicity involving him occurred in 1947, when he promised Universal he would help promote *The Senator Was Indiscreet*. He gave several rare interviews, and in December of that year, *Photoplay* ran an article in which staff member Cameron Shipp talked to the three men who were most responsible for the film: Powell (actor), Nunnally Johnson (producer), and George S. Kaufman (director). The article was set up as a pseudo conversation, allegedly taking place in Chasen's. Shipp says he was taking the three men out to lunch to obtain a "funny story" for publication, and that, given how clever these three were, it was like "being sent to Siberia to get a handful of snow." Interestingly, the resulting "funny" interview, written as if it were a movie script, shows that Shipp, Kaufman, and Johnson can't shut up, but Powell says nothing. He wasn't a self-promoter and never had been, nor was he a rampaging ego. At first frustrated, Shipp, a clever promoter, finally figures out that *this* can be his point about the elusive star. In the final article, Shipp presents Powell as suave, bored by it all, yet unfailingly gentlemanly and polite—in short, he presents the on-screen Powell as the offscreen Powell, solid proof of movie stardom. While the others are yakking, Shipp says he spies Powell spying

Boris Karloff eating his lunch, and provides the perfect description of Powell doing a double take as he sees that Boris Karloff looks just like—Boris Karloff! The scene is right out of a William Powell movie. Three men who think they're funny are talking their heads off at the center of the frame, but they're upstaged by the silent William Powell. He does it just by looking casually over his shoulder ... and then looking a second time.

In many ways, William Powell was the perfect movie star. Unlike Boyer, he had no accent to be explained, and unlike Flynn, he had no offscreen peccadilloes to sweep under the carpet. He could do anything you asked him to do—and would. He was focused, reliable, and easy to work with. He could be dragged upstream by a fish or dance a seductive tango—it was all effortless to him. He was available as needed, the ideal studio system movie star. Yet there was nothing ordinary or pedestrian about him. He represents the best of what Hollywood could put forth, a happy wedding between the basic quality of the product and the system that assembled the parts. He was both the exception that proved the rule and the rule itself.



William Powell, a gentleman to the end.

* Although Boyer never won an Academy Award, he was given a special honorary Oscar in 1942 for his “progressive cultural achievement in establishing the French Research Foundation in Los Angeles.” Boyer had returned to France in 1939 when the war in Europe broke out in order to enlist in the French army and had been assigned to the 37th Artillery as a private second-class. He was mustered out within eleven weeks and returned to the United States, which was believed to be good for French and American relations. He was a firm de Gaullist, and participated in creating propaganda to promote the Free French. He received four Oscar nominations: Besides *Conquest*, in 1937, there were *Algiers* (1938), *Gaslight* (1944), and *Fanny* (1961).

* *The Trial of Mary Dugan* had starred Norma Shearer. Boyer’s leading lady was his friend and countrywoman Françoise Rosay.

* Boyer played in only two more films before returning to France. They were both 1932 releases—a small part as a lecherous chauffeur in Jean Harlow’s *Red-Headed Woman* and the role of a doctor in Claudette Colbert’s *The Man from Yesterday*.

† Although Boyer would always return to Europe for special roles, such as the highly successful *Mayerling* in 1936, the exquisite *Madame de ...* in 1953, and more, Charles Boyer really became Hollywood’s quintessential American Frenchman.

* *Mayerling* was a huge hit, due largely to Boyer. This period—1936 to 1937—brought forth a great many movie stories about royals having to abdicate, run away, kill themselves, or suffer nobly and abandon their true loves, all inspired by the story of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. *Mayerling* was the best of these.

* When Lamarr became a top star at MGM, they, too, had trouble knowing what to do with her. First they stuck her in *Ziegfeld Girl*, where she stood around in orchids while Lana Turner got all the dramatic scenes and Judy Garland got all the musical numbers. Metro tried to cast her as part of the John Steinbeck world in *Tortilla Flat* (1942), but Lamarr floated among the pastoral types as if she were in costume for a masquerade ball. Later, they gave her a real pip—the role of Tondelayo, sultry native girl, in the silly *White Cargo* (1942). To Metro’s credit, however, she did have one of her few really good parts there as a driven career woman in *H. M. Pulham, Esq.* (1941).

* Hollywood was good at finding popular star pairs: MacDonald and Eddy, Turner and Gable, Powell and Loy, Van Johnson and June Allyson, Astaire and Rogers, among others.

† *Love Affair* was remade as *An Affair to Remember* in 1957, starring Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr and also directed by Leo McCarey, and as *Love Affair* in 1994, with Warren Beatty, Annette Bening, and Katharine Hepburn in the Maria Ouspenskaya role.

* The “unselfish noble male” Boyer plays was not unique in the Hollywood of this era. For example, *Now, Voyager*, also with Bette Davis, presents another example beautifully played by Paul Henreid—like Boyer, a suave foreigner.

* Chevalier described Boyer as “the French Valentino” and himself as “the fanciful Casanova.” When Boyer was told this, he replied, “I have always considered myself a character actor, not a handsome lover type.”

* Gabin returned to France to fight in the war.

* Powell, who was born in 1892, was first married to actress Eileen Wilson in 1915. She gave birth to his only child, William David Powell, in 1925. They were divorced in early 1931, and he married Lombard on June 26, 1931, divorcing her on August 18, 1933. Powell planned to marry Jean Harlow, whom he had become engaged to in 1936, but her untimely death that year of uremic poisoning (she was twenty-six) prevented their marriage. His final marriage, to actress Diana Lewis, lasted until his death in 1984 at age ninety-one.

* At Warners, in such movies as 1932’s *Jewel Robbery* and *One Way Passage*, other Nick Charles-ish qualities were fully on display. In *Jewel Robbery*, Powell’s a suave thief with an ingenious method of distracting store guards: He gives them marijuana cigarettes to smoke. In *One Way Passage*, a serious movie in which he’s a condemned prisoner being taken to the United States on an ocean liner, he meets Kay Francis (also his leading lady in *Jewel Robbery*), who is dying from the Movie Disease. Their romance is lighthearted, as each conceals the truth from the other, but ultimately heartbreaking. All of what we know to be William Powell’s personal characteristics as a movie star are fully in evidence in both movies.

* Powell’s last MGM feature was to be a remake of *A Free Soul*, entitled *The Girl Who Had Everything* (1953). The film completed his contract, and when he left the studio he was in his sixties. He had been on the MGM payroll a full twenty years, entitling him to a pension. He would make only two more movies, *How to Marry a Millionaire* for Fox, in later 1953, and *Mister Roberts* for Warners, in 1955.

* In one of these scenes, Powell escorts Loy to the Cotton Club on election night. Rodgers and Hart composed a song for this scene. Its lyrics say, “Lord—what is the matter with me?” The tune is that of the very familiar “Blue Moon.” Hart later set different lyrics to Rodgers’s tune. Today, it’s startling to hear this old chestnut with different words. Hart liked the first set better because the words were blackly cynical and despairing, all about getting beaten up by your lover but going back to him.

* Powell received his first Oscar nomination as Best Actor for this movie. He was also nominated another two times, for *My Man Godfrey* in 1936 and *Life with Father* in 1947. It also made a real star out of Myrna Loy, who by 1937 was on the list of ten top box office draws; an honor she would repeat in 1938, the year she was voted “queen” to Gable’s “king.”

* On television, Peter Lawford and Phyllis Kirk played Nick and Nora Charles in 1959.

* Another perfect example of William Powell’s ability to get the most from a line appears in *Another Thin Man*. He’s seated by himself in a rowdy nightclub. “Are you alone?” he is asked. “The good are often alone,” he replies.

* He and Loy made thirteen films together, six *Thin Man* movies as well as *Evelyn Prentice* (1934); *The Great Ziegfeld*, *Libeled Lady*, *Double Wedding* (1937); *I Love You Again*, *Love Crazy* (1941); and *Manhattan Melodrama*. Loy also appeared with Powell in a fourteenth film as a gag. In *The Senator Was Indiscreet*, the absurd politician finally returns home at film’s end, to be greeted by his little wifey: Loy, in a surprise cameo.

* The bad-man love interest, first played by Clark Gable, has been seriously discounted in overt sexuality by the casting of Fernando Lamas, who *is* sexy and attractive but who has been deliberately toned down. He’s bad, but given little chance to show what he would really do with a woman in his arms. Since his hair has been prematurely grayed for the role, he looks like a contemporary of Powell’s.

PART THREE

TESTING THE SYSTEM

BONUSES: ODDITIES AND CHARACTER ACTORS

Despite how much it seemed to have been designed by Rube Goldberg, the star machine was not intended to be kindly, whimsical, or open to individual interpretation. It was operated by businessmen applying business rules: Making money was its only yardstick. The one thing that is most often forgotten about Hollywood—because of its glamour and its entertainment value—is that it was a well-run business system. Obviously the star machine worked: It made movie stars. But it also could prove itself in other ways. It could make use of its own odds and ends, accepting unexpected bonuses of stardom that came out of nowhere, and it could react swiftly to a crisis it didn't bring on itself. The movie factory could write, cast, design, direct, produce, and release a “vehicle” to accommodate any test it had to face... and it could do so rapidly.

The star machine demonstrated this strength during the 1930s and 1940s two ways. First, it capitalized on any strong public interest in actors who did not fit the conventional “star mold,” turning them into big or temporary stars. Second, it turned the crisis of losing many male stars during World War II into an opportunity to introduce new faces and new types.

Given the unpredictability of public response and the shifting trends of culture, *anyone* who becomes a major movie star is an oddity. You have to be different to make it, or you have to be so terribly ordinary that by default you're different. However, there are genuinely inexplicable examples of stardom—*oddities*. Such actors and actresses were bonuses for the system. They just emerged and were there, because the fans liked them and the business was smart

enough to capitalize on them. When opportunity knocked, Hollywood knew how to open the door. Star “bonuses” were more than welcome. They came in two basic packages: unglamorous types, which the public unexpectedly embraced, and character actors who could step up and carry the lead in a cheap movie.

I’m not talking about nonglamorous superstars. Everyone knows that movie stars are not always beautiful or even sexy but have something else to offer. It’s not hard to understand why a short man with the face of an angry bulldog—Edward G. Robinson—becomes a star, and not just a star for a day or two, but for decades. Robinson is charismatic, and he is a superb actor in both comedy and drama. The same thing applies to James Cagney. On-screen he makes you believe anything—any woman would love him, any man should fear him, any crazy thing could happen to him. Robinson and Cagney are clearly leading men.

No, I’m talking about the stars whom no one could have predicted, who would never have been selected for the star machine buildup. To find an explanation, one must first accept the unreality of the medium that creates all sorts of appealing “star” oddities: for example, Porky Pig. Is Porky Pig a star? Of course. The pig romped to fame wearing a V-neck sweater and stuttering in a little cartoon called “I Haven’t Got a Hat.” He was second-billed to Oliver Owl, but the owl never caught on. The pig still holds pride of place in Warner Bros. cartoons today. He’s the one who waves good-bye and tells us the bad news: “Th-th-that’s all, folks!” There’s no doubt but that Porky Pig is a star, but why should the public embrace a stuttering, insecure, overweight little guy? It’s easy to see why Bugs Bunny (with his androgyny and snappish sass) or Daffy Duck (who appeals to the lunatic in all of us) or Tom and Jerry (the Abbott and Costello of animation) or even Pepé Le Pew (so *très charmant*) could become stars—but why the pig? Well, that’s showbiz, folks.*

Many star oddities have made the top ten list of box office draws. On it are Rin Tin Tin, a dog; cowboys Gene Autry and Roy Rogers (whom no one really thinks of as movie stars); and the ice-skating phenomenon Sonja Henie (three years on top). The business always understood that stardom was about connecting to the

viewer. There were lots of unpredictable successes. Mae West was an oddity whose ploy was to make fun of the concept of “female sex symbol.” She was an oddity in drag, as it were, pretending to be what she wasn’t: a young and desirable leading lady. She sent up the concept, and thus conquered it. Oddballs were a necessary “other” to the excessive beauty and glamour of the system. They made room for audiences who wanted reassurance about their own lack of glamour and glory. Oddities provided variety, offered the possibility of unusual story lines, and reflected the unpredictable nature of stardom. For instance, why should Clifton Webb have become a star in movies?

CLIFTON WEBB



Clifton Webb

Clifton Webb was not young. He wasn’t sexy. He didn’t appear to be strong and virile. And by the narrow-minded terms of his own day,

he appeared not only prissy but effeminate and clearly projected qualities everyone assumes are fanbane: intelligence, education, and erudition. Yet he not only became a major star of the late 1940s and 1950s, but also a top box office draw. The brilliance of the studio star machine was that, when it stumbled across the fact that Webb was likable, it didn't waste a minute to begin creating vehicles for him. Webb, who had actually made silent movies, was "born" to sound motion picture audiences with his Oscar-nominated performance as Waldo Lydecker in *Laura* in 1944.* The part was tailor made—acerbic, elegant, sophisticated—and shaped Webb's screen persona for the rest of his career. (Lydecker, of course, was actually a possessive, obsessed, murdering liar, but audiences embraced his smart-assed superior attitude and razor-sharp wit.) In his second film, *The Dark Corner*, Webb played another villain, a Lydecker clone. Webb's popularity as the type inspired Fox to include him in their biggest prestige film of 1946, *The Razor's Edge*, casting him again as an acid-tongued social arbiter.

Having observed Webb's success as Waldo Lydecker, his studio decided to let him *be* Lydecker—forever. It was a sensible idea, but Webb would never have become the box office draw he became had Fox not eventually stumbled onto the key for the Webb formula: Eliminate the villainry, keep the acerbic comedy. His career might have been *only* as a supporting actor, or might have died out altogether, had he not made *Sitting Pretty*, the film that changed everything for him. In 1948, Webb was cast as the scene-stealing Lynn Belvedere in *Sitting Pretty*, co-starred with Maureen O'Hara and Robert Young. The movie was a slim little piece about a male babysitter in a neighborhood of suburban gossips. It was as if Waldo Lydecker had reformed himself, left his job as a New York columnist and radio personality, and entered the sitcom world of the 1950s. Belvedere, like Lydecker, is a writer. He walks like Waldo and talks like Waldo, and like Waldo, loathes sentiment, children, and American homespun values. This time, however, he doesn't kill any of his co-stars. He just wishes he could.*

Sitting Pretty took the edge off Webb's Lydecker persona. While not making him lovably sentimental like an old Lionel Barrymore

character, it made him totally acceptable. The secret was that Webb was allowed to tell little brats to shut up, to dump cereal on the head of a baby that was flinging the stuff around the room, to provide comeuppance to a nosy neighbor—in short, to do all the things that audiences longed to do in their own lives. They took Clifton Webb into their hearts as a surrogate smart-ass, the person they would be if only they were, well, more like Clifton Webb. The unlikelihood of average Americans wanting to be Clifton Webb was not lost on 20th Century–Fox, but they knew what to do when they had a bonus winner. In the next few years, Webb starred in movie after movie, becoming a solid headliner and a genuine movie star.[†]

Webb understood what had happened to him, and he happily embraced his rehabilitated Lydecker-ness in his private life. He attended every party he could, almost always with his celebrated mother, Maybelle, on his arm, and he became famous as a fashion plate. He was credited with introducing Hollywood to the white mess jacket and sackcloth slacks, and he was named to the list of ten best-dressed men in the world. He was also eminently quotable, uncorking offscreen the same kind of acid wit and smug (but comic) self-satisfaction he displayed in movies. He told reporters he couldn't play murderers anymore because he would be committing professional suicide if he did. "I'm now America's sweetheart," he announced. As to his having left the theatre to become a movie character, he was very clear-minded: "I love Hollywood," he said, "and the chance to make more and more money. I *love* money. Furthermore, I need money and I will do positively anything to get it." He was a perfect American hero of the materialistic 1950s. Webb knew how to *connect*.

Clifton Webb became a star by being an anti-star. He stuck it to the public and their way of life, and they loved him for it. He portrayed an unlovable human being in a period when there were far too many lovable old stars around on-screen. Webb rejected audience love, making the fans come to him on his own terms. As a result, he seemed new and refreshing.

The fifteen years of Webb's stardom can be rationally explained by its taking place during the postwar transition to antiheroism. But how does an ugly old mug like Wallace Beery get to be a movie star? And a hammy old ugly mug at that. It's understandable why comics who are neither handsome nor well built can become stars—Eddie Cantor, W. C. Fields, Jerry Lewis, Danny Kaye. They're comedians who star, not movie stars who are funny. Comedy comes first with them, and their ability to be funny is the source of their stardom. (Women comediennes are either glamorous, like Carole Lombard and Lucille Ball, or reduced to sidekick roles, like Eve Arden and Martha Raye, or leads in B movies, like Judy Canova.)

WALLACE BEERY



Wallace Beery

Wallace Beery was once thought of as a great actor, being nominated twice for the Oscar and winning once.* Yes, *that* Wallace Beery, the corny old devil who beached up playing Jane Powell's father in the 1948 *A Date with Judy*, in which he takes rumba lessons from Carmen Miranda. Furthermore, his is no minor stardom. Wallace Beery was a top ten box office draw from 1931 to 1935—five solid years. Not only that, he made a comeback to the top list in 1940, for an overall total of six years on top. *All* Beery's movies made money. Audiences loved him. His career represents the perfect triumph of the star machine's ability to capitalize on someone unusual. Beery, a professional actor, kept going the way a professional actor keeps going. When he aged, he took on character work, and made his characters the leading men. He was an unstoppable kind of movie star who hogged every frame he ever entered.

Beery was a palooka. A gravelly-voiced, mug-pussed, eyeball-rolling ham. He's all jerky motions, beefy presence, and loud guffaws. He wears a perpetual "aw, shucks" grin, and that would be one thing, but he manages to make us as an audience aware that his "aw, shucks" is really "look out, suckers." Beery is ever the con artist. He's not to be found playing a judge or a royal personage or a beloved old schoolteacher. Beery is decidedly low class and a crock, and that's his glory. Movie stars couldn't *all* be grand. Someone had to be a schlub, and Beery commanded the field. While he was on-screen, he could call the space his own. Even the young and super-handsome Clark Gable looked a bit uninteresting when he had to put up or shut up against Beery in *Hell Divers* in 1932.

Wallace Beery came to movies already an experienced pro.* He was born in 1885 (sometimes listed as 1881, 1886, or 1889) and began his career in the theatre in 1903 and never stopped working as an actor until his death at age sixty-four in 1949. His official movie debut was in 1913 at the Essanay Studios in Chicago. In a 1935 interview, he claimed that his "first screen appearance was as a raw-boned Swedish housemaid in a one-reel comedy." This was Beery's version of his career, but research indicates that his first movie was *His Athletic Wife*, a one-reel comedy, and it was followed

by a series of comedies called the George Ade fables. His first *Sweedie* was in 1914. (This housemaid character, Sweedie, was such a hit that Essanay produced a series.) Louella Parsons wrote the stories, and Beery, who ran the production unit, co-directed and played the lead. A new comedy was turned out every two weeks.

In his early years, Beery alternated between comedy turns and roles as villains. He was slender then, fairly good looking, and certainly impressive. He was six feet one inch tall and a solid (no flab) 200 pounds.[†] In the 1920s world of teensy movie players, he was much in demand for his stature, and he played memorable villains in Mary Pickford's *The Little American* in 1917, directed by Cecil B. DeMille, and Blanche Sweet's starring vehicle *The Unpardonable Sin* in 1919. His biggest silent hit came in 1920 when he played Magua, the Native American villain in *The Last of the Mohicans*. He also played the important role of Richard the Lionheart in Allan Dwan's directorial version of *Robin Hood* in 1922, which starred Douglas Fairbanks. Other famous Beery silent films were *The Covered Wagon* (1923), *The Lost World* (1925), and *Old Ironsides* (1926).

In 1929, Beery was employed by Paramount, and he had been in movies sixteen years when his contract was due to expire. With sound movies coming in, Paramount didn't renew seven of its silent stars: Florence Vidor, Bebe Daniels, Richard Dix, Adolphe Menjou, Emil Jannings, Pola Negri...and Beery. He was off the screen for a year, and it seemed likely that, given his age and the emphasis on good looks in Hollywood, his film career was ended. Suddenly, however, he was hired by MGM to play a showcase role that had originally been intended for Lon Chaney, who had just died of cancer. Emergency gave Beery his chance, and after his Oscar nomination for this role (in *The Big House*), his sound career was ensured.

Beery was next cast as Pat Garrett in the 1929 *Billy the Kid*, with Johnny Mack Brown, and then as P. T. Barnum (a role ready-made for him) in 1930's *A Lady's Morals* (the first try to turn opera star Grace Moore into an audience favorite). Moore didn't go over very

well as Jenny Lind, but Beery was a hit as Barnum. After that, he got lucky once again, when he was put into a movie with Marie Dressler, another aging wreck with great talent. The film was called *Min and Bill* (1930), and Dressler won the Best Actress award for her performance. The movie was also a smash hit at the box office, and MGM—happy at finding a bonus on their roster—defined Beery as an unquestionable star. He proved them right when he appeared in *The Champ* in 1931—an old-fashioned story about a drunken ex-prize fighter who has the total devotion of his little son (Jackie Cooper). The movie was nominated for Best Picture of 1931/32, but lost to *Grand Hotel*, and Beery, also nominated as Best Actor, *almost* lost. When the votes were counted, he had only one vote fewer than Fredric March, and the Academy called that too close to declare anything but a tie. Beery and March shared the Oscar.*

After *The Champ*, Beery took his place as a major player in the studio system of 1930s Hollywood, one of the biggest stars in Metro's heaven. He appeared in nearly a full decade of quality material and in showcase roles written and designed especially for him. It's surprising how many of Beery's films of the 1930s are frequently revived today. He's the villainous Preysing in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer all-star *Grand Hotel* in 1932 ("I hate the lousy part," he said, "but I'm playing it"); the husband of Marie Dressler in another huge box office hit, *Tugboat Annie* (1933); and Jean Harlow's coarse husband in *Dinner at Eight* (1933), another Metro all-star hit. He played the lead in *Viva Villa!* (1934), the colorful role of Long John Silver in 1934's *Treasure Island* (hopping around spryly on a bogus peg leg), repeated as Barnum in *The Mighty Barnum* (1934), and made a dominant figure out of Uncle Sid in the 1935 filmed version of Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!* In all these films, he received billing above the title, because no matter what, Wallace Beery *starred*. He would have it no other way, and heaven help the co-star who got in his key light. (Robert Young, one of his fellow cast victims, stated succinctly that Beery was "a shitty person."*)

However, when Beery was folded into a star ensemble piece like *Grand Hotel* or *Dinner at Eight*, his professionalism revealed itself. In *Grand Hotel*, for instance, where he is the movie's only villain, he

plays it straight, with no winking at the audience about what a lovable old rogue he is. His performance is in consort with the rest of the cast, and perfectly true to his role in the hotel's "passing parade." Although his part as Harlow's crude husband in *Dinner at Eight* is essentially a comedy one, he keeps it in check, once again in tune with the rest of the stars. In an A-list movie with an A-list crowd, Beery knew how to tamp it down and play his note in the orchestra correctly.

Looking over Beery's work at Metro in the 1930s reveals one of Hollywood's clearest stories about how an oddity can become a star bonus and a studio can facilitate the process. He had the good luck to be at Metro, and Metro had the good luck to have signed him. Metro was a studio at which the concept of "star power" was fully understood, and the power of Wallace Beery shows up immediately even in a film that, while well directed and written, was never intended to be an award-winning masterpiece. *Hell Divers* (1932) is such a film, one made purely for entertainment. Beery is billed over Clark Gable, and is, in fact, being used to boost Gable's career. In other words, the studio wanted Gable to be discovered by audiences, and they know moviegoers would certainly find him in a Wallace Beery film.

Hell Divers, directed by George Hill, is a story about men, machines, and the noble tradition of the military, all done in a brawling atmosphere of camaraderie and double entendre. Beery plays a happy-go-lucky guy who bangs a piano and sings, "Oh, the monkeys have no tails in sam-bo-ango" with a real macho gusto that is utterly beguiling. Not yet out of control, he seems natural, improvisational. There's a rough, honest quality to his mugging—he uses the acting technique he mastered in silent film and just adds noise. Beery plays an ordinary mutt who will be brave and matter-of-fact in the face of death, sacrificing himself for others. He gets to play a great male weepie scene in which he has to say good-bye to a beloved skipper who is leaving the service because he's lost an arm in a plane crash. "I wish I could give you one of mine," says Beery, after he's awkwardly, mistakenly offered to shake the skipper's nonexistent right hand. Both men enact the behavior of an era in

which men who felt deep emotions weren't supposed to cry. Beery is totally in tune with his own zeitgeist in this scene, and when his longtime woman friend, played by Marjorie Rambeau (who runs a shady bar but has a heart of gold), describes him, she says, "No woman's a wife to a sailor. All she can be is a port of call," she's defining the Beery star popularity. Women in the audience liked him because he was temporary fun, and men liked him because he was *their* free alter ego.

With his success in *The Champ* (1931), Beery was cast in more movies with a kid. He and Cooper were re-paired in films like *O'Shaughnessy's Boy* (1935). His role continues his tradition of a lovable, no-better-than-he-should-be kinda guy. This time he's a circus lion tamer whose wife skips out, taking his son. This is hackneyed material, but within it, Beery carves out moments that can break any parent's heart. When he's finally reunited with his older little guy, played by Cooper as a starchy military school martinet, Beery's joy seems to fill him up, lighting his eyes, his smile, and his entire face. So eager, so happy, he fails to pick up on the signals that the head of the military school is clearly observing—the kid hates him. Wearing an awkward suit, hair slicked back, huge grin in place, Beery approaches his son all tenderness and love, full of plans and memories—it's a killer to watch. He has an expressive face and a voice he can modulate and use as an instrument. His schmaltz seems to be completely authentic as he eagerly tries to please his boy. Seeing that his son carefully lines up his boots in proper military fashion each night, Beery grabs his and does the same. He tries so hard, with such innocence and simplicity! Beery *always* knew what he was doing.

By the time he appears in MGM's version of Robert Louis Stevenson's classic pirate story, *Treasure Island* (1934), Beery is practically working on cruise control. He doesn't act, he performs. Perfectly cast as Long John Silver, he knows what the audience wants from him and how to give it to them. There is something brutish in him, in both his appearance and his demeanor, so playing a villain requires him to do little. Working from that base, he boldly gives the audience the "wink-wink-I'm-really-okay" performance of

the decade. He's both comic and threatening, and pulls the sentimentality back from the brink just in the nick. Paired yet again with Jackie Cooper (wearing what appears to be a wig cast off by Jean Harlow), he steals every scene. Not for him W. C. Fields's famous warning "Do not act with children or dogs." Beery (and for that matter, Fields) knew how to upstage a kid. While Cooper Goody-Two-shoes around saying, "Pon my soul!", Beery stumps about on his peg leg, arghing and shivering his timbers, managing to eat the scenery, burp, and carry right on. In Wallace Beery, like it or not, you confront a man who knows better than you do what you'll put up with.

After his first years as a star, Beery began to play a cartoon version of himself. He not only played the same character, he gave the same performance. His movies and his type became a franchise. Like today's movie names, à la *Star Wars IV: The Phantom Menace*, Beery's movies might have been called *Wallace Beery IV: Twenty Mule Team* or *Wallace Beery X: Bad Bascomb*. Accepting the wretched excess that came to define his work, MGM ground out programmers to rip off his popularity, and as far as wretched excess was concerned, Beery more than rose to the occasion. As his belly flopped over his belt and his jowls hit his shoulders, his movie roles followed suit. It was hard to decide which enlarged more, his waistline or his nose, and yet Beery remained a certifiable star. At least he deserves credit for his ability to hang on at the very top, and to successfully mug his way through the worst of material, never losing the majority of the audience's affection because no matter what critics had to say, the moviegoing public loved the guy.

As Beery aged, he continued to star in remarkably successful low-budget movies. But these were not B films: Beery *was* a star, and his presence guaranteed their definition as programmers. Sometimes, however, he was pushed into works that used him only in the crassest business manner imaginable. Such a movie was the 1941 *The Bad Man*, which "starred" him but just used his name to draw in the suckers. He plays a Mexican bandit, tricked out in tall sombrero, a sequined "south of the border" suit, and sporting a Spanish accent ("Breeng ze womans here"). It's easy to imagine the

behind-the-scenes business discussion: “We have this property we bought—a weak play sitting around. Let’s use it to test some of our youngsters. We can surround them with strong people under contract and shove it out there.” The “youngsters” were relative newcomers Ronald Reagan* (a Warners guy in a Metro film) and Laraine Day, a pretty and intelligent girl who was being groomed for her brief stardom.

Perhaps fearing the results, MGM shoved not one, but two of their leading crowd-pleasers into the mix: Wallace Beery and Lionel Barrymore. (Imagine a movie with not one, but two old crocks, one more outrageous than the other.†) A movie like *The Bad Man* was the studio contract star’s fate, and Beery accepted his job. “I’m fat and handsome,” he bellows. “Look at me!” (Those very words might have been his acting credo.) Barrymore, now wheelchair-bound by his arthritis, also bellows and mugs and wheels around at an incredible pace. (The finale is simply horrible. With Barrymore sitting in his wheelchair, tied up behind Beery’s horse, the two men race to town over the tundra to save the situation. We’re treated to a few minutes of Beery’s furious riding, Barrymore’s furiously bellowing, “Whee, faster, faster,” et cetera. Movies like this discourage film scholarship.)

Beery played to the groundlings without shame or apology and always got away with it. MGM kept him as a leading man as long as his box office warranted it, squeezing every last drop out of his bonus stardom.



Wallace Beery was perfectly matched with Marie Dressler in *Tugboat Annie*, their second feature together.



A leading man, but always a great character actor ... Beery in his Oscar-winning role as a boxer who fights for his honor and his kid (*The Champ*)...



...as a cruel Prussian industrialist in *Grand Hotel*... and shivering his timbers as the treacherous Long John Silver in *Treasure Island* (with Jackie Cooper).



As I studied Wallace Beery, an actor I've never liked, I found myself starting to respond to him. Was I losing my mind? (There's nothing like back-to-back-to-back screenings of movies like *The Bad Man*, *Bad Bascomb*, *Wyoming*, and *Jackass Mail* to drive you crazy.) But it was becoming clear why Beery deserved his stardom. There haven't been many truly low-class movie stars, and Beery filled a niche during a decade when people were out of work and less educated than moviegoers today. He was an oddity who was reassuring. He had nothing—no looks, no education—yet he triumphed or at least made everyone cry for him when he didn't. He was strong, colorful, and amusing. His films mixed action, broad humor, and a deep brand of sentiment that he would let roll along and then suddenly undercut. We don't have actors like Wallace Beery today. There aren't any stories for them, because we've grown too sophisticated for lost orphans, wagon trains west, and pots of gold, and too politically correct for Mexican bandits, peg-leg cripples, and slave traders. His types have disappeared. We don't need him anymore, because there's no role for him to play in our fantasies. (We're also fixated on beauty, and when an outrageous pirate no better than he should be appears on our screens, it's either Johnny Depp or Geena Davis.) Beery was a star because he fit his times, and because he was a lifelong professional who knew what to

do when given a role, no matter what it might be. In that sense, there's nothing odd about his story at all. He was just another lucky bonus for an efficient system.

STARS BEGAT STARS. If a short man like Alan Ladd becomes a star, he must have a perfectly proportioned, equally short female co-star. Voilà! Tiny Veronica Lake becomes a star as his leading lady. It was inevitable that when Wallace Beery became a star, some Beery-like female would have to be found. And so MGM created a romantic couple that was about as odd as it gets—an aging, out of shape, beat-up version of Garbo and Gilbert for the masses.

So here they are on-screen. The guy is forty-five years old, and the babe is sixty-one. Both are, to put it tactfully, overweight and out of shape. (He's fat and she's a bag.) He has the beat-up face of an old hound dog, and she has jowls. There's a deep sorrow somewhere in her eyes, and a callous lack of any real concern in his. No matter what you put on them for a costume, it's gonna sag and hang, but they are your romantic leads. And everyone loved them. Wallace Beery and Marie Dressler.

Dressler has a sagging bosom, a plain face ungraced by cosmetics, and a limping walk. Both she and Beery are considerably overweight by today's standards, although Beery's stomach has not yet headed for South America. His teeth are broken, with one possibly missing, and hers are crooked. Both of them have dark circles under their eyes and flyaway, uncoiffed hair. Their costumes have no little touches of glamour. He's in T-shirts and old pants. She shuffles downstairs barefoot, wearing an old bathrobe held together by a large safety pin. While she reads with her glasses on, he eats a watermelon, casually spitting the seeds out onto her floor. There's no Botox and certainly no face-lifts. They are a visual relief on-screen—*real* people. Dressler even refers to her age, adding, "When I was young I used to make 'em sizzle." (To this, Beery replies, "Yeah, back in the Civil War days they wasn't so particular.")

Min and Bill (1930) co-stars Beery and Dressler, but it is really Dressler's film. In people's minds, *Min and Bill* has more or less merged with their co-starring vehicle released three years later, *Tugboat Annie* (1933).^{*} *Min and Bill* presents them as a pair who frequently knock 'em back together, but it's made clear that Beery has his own room above the bar she runs, as he refers to himself as "a boarder with her for ten years, paying my rent." (In 1930, a pre-code era, there was no need to excuse an unmarried sexual partnership, so these words are clearly there to define their separateness. In *Tugboat Annie*, however, they are a married couple.) Although Bill flirts with another floozy (Marjorie Rambeau), incurring Min's wrath, the film is a mother-love story, not a relationship movie. Dressler raises Rambeau's abandoned daughter (Dorothy Jordan) and makes the Stella Dallas sacrifice for her: Ultimately, she shoots and kills Rambeau, who is threatening to ruin the girl's successful marriage to a wealthy young man. As the new bride and her husband, surrounded by love and happiness, board their honeymoon yacht, Dressler, tears in her eyes, watches from the wharf unbeknownst to the couple. Then she is arrested and taken away. (Just another happy Hollywood ending!)

The great thing about Beery and Dressler is that they are two highly capable acting pros, and they're wonderful together as they engage in their easy, improvisational gab. As he leans back in her barber chair and she shaves him and tells him her troubles, they trade insults. Both are experts at physical action, such as in the scene in which Min attacks Bill after finding Rambeau sitting in his lap, half drunk. Their fight is epic. She tries to choke him. He shoves the bed at her. They crash to the floor, wrestle, and *really* fight, pulling hair, jabbing fingers at eyeballs, yelling and screaming. She throws a chamber pot at him, and when he seeks refuge in a closet, she tries to break the door down with an ax. When she finally crowns him but good with a beer bottle, as he sinks down to the floor he manages to piteously whine: "Min, now I'm really mad." As she looks at his body, tied up in the fishnet that he accidentally tangled with, she wails, "Bill! You ain't hurt? Aw, gee...You made

me so sore. *Bill!*” In other words, *Min and Bill* is a real American love story—full of violence.

Marie Dressler, of course, was no machine-made product. She was a trooper. Dressler made her stage debut in 1886 at the age of seventeen in her native Canada. By 1907, she was a fully established star on the London stage. When Mack Sennett saw her perform, he immediately recognized her potential as a moving picture comedienne, and in 1914, he offered her the chance to appear in a movie he wanted to make from one of her most popular stage hits, *Tillie's Nightmare*. The movie that resulted—*Tillie's Punctured Romance*—paired Dressler with Charlie Chaplin and Mabel Normand and has since become a classic. Dressler steals the show, even from Chaplin and Normand. Playing a bumptious farm girl who knocks Chaplin flat when she tries to cuddle up to him, she's an unforgettable sight in a ruffled print dress, a long string of beads, and a dime-store hat decorated with some species of bird—possibly a duck—perched jauntily on top. *Tillie's Punctured Romance* in its own time was so popular that Sennett followed it immediately with *Tillie Wakes Up* (1914) and *Tillie's Tomato Surprise* (1914). Although these films did all right at the box office, neither matched the success of the original. Dressler left movies, and was off the screen for the next decade, from 1916 to 1926. She returned to movies to provide excellent support for big-name stars, such as Constance Talmadge in *Breakfast at Sunrise* (1927). When sound came in, Dressler's theatre experience, her gravelly voice, and her unique presence made her a natural for motion pictures. She made, among others, *Hollywood Review of 1929*. In early 1930, she had two smash hits: *Let Us Be Gay* and *Anna Christie*.

In *Let Us Be Gay*, Dressler proved she didn't always have to play a blowsy old waterfront woman. She cleaned up real good, playing a delightful society hostess called “Boocie” (short for Mrs. Boucicault), whose philosophy of behavior is well stated: “When I was a girl and went to a man's room, I had the decency not to do it before the servants.” Dressler could play low comedy, high comedy of manners, and tragedy with equal skill. She had trod the professional boards.*

Her appearance opposite Garbo in the talking version of *Anna Christie* caused MGM bosses *really* to focus on her. She held her own and created a perfect waterfront barhopper, inspiring her casting opposite Beery in *Min and Bill* that year. Dressler /was about fifteen years older than Beery, but she was famous for making friends easily, for her wit and warmth, and for her still-youthful zest. These were qualities that the movie camera picked up and recorded, and no one questioned the age difference.

After her 1930/31 Oscar win as Best Actress for *Min and Bill*, Dressler made four quick films that paired her with comedienne Polly Moran: *Caught Short* (1930), *Reducing* and *Politics* (in 1931), and *Prosperity* (1932). As 1933 opened up, she was at the peak. Besides *Tugboat Annie*, she was scheduled for *Dinner at Eight*.

In *Dinner at Eight* (1933)—her most often seen appearance today—Dressler is off the tugboat and away from the waterfront. She's sailing up Park Avenue in about two yards of fox furs, an actress playing an actress who is past her prime, who has financial troubles, whose feet hurt. She doesn't want to try for a comeback ("I'll have my double chins in privacy") and she knows her time has passed ("I belong to the Delmonico period"). The same quality that allowed her to be believable as Min makes her believable as Carlotta Vance. Her Carlotta has had a stardom that elevated her status in life, but did not inflate either her bankbook or her low-down sense of reality. "I didn't do so badly for a little girl from Quincy, Illi-noise, eh, Ducky?" she asks Lionel Barrymore. If Min had gone on the stage, she would have been Vance, saying something like "I didn't do so badly for an old waterfront bag, did I?"

Dressler's next movie was *Christopher Bean* (1933), with Lionel Barrymore and Jean Hersholt, and it would be her last. She died on July 28, 1934, just as MGM was planning to reteam her with Beery for the fourth time. No character actress in Hollywood was bigger at the box office than she was. The motion picture exhibitors rated her as more powerful to their business than Garbo, Gaynor, or Harlow. *Time* magazine had featured her on the cover in August 1933. She went out at the top.



Marie Dressler “cleaned up real good” to play Carlotta Vance, a fading actress with a touch of the tugboat in her soul, in *Dinner at Eight* (with Lionel Barrymore).

After Dressler’s death, Beery went without a regular female co-star until 1940, when he was paired with another oddity, Marjorie Main, in a movie called *Wyoming*.^{*} Main played a lady blacksmith, and was given star billing alongside Beery. Clearly, MGM hoped for a Dressler-like success. Main had begun her movie career in 1932, in *A House Divided*, having been a serious stage actress with a solid career. Between 1932 and *Wyoming*, she had appeared in about thirty-five movies, always in supporting roles. She had choice moments in some of them: a key role in *Dead End* (1937), repeating her original stage part; as Barbara Stanwyck’s mother in *Stella Dallas* (1937); and as Walter Pidgeon’s mother in *Dark Command* (1940), in which she had a major death scene. In 1939, she snagged a role that would shape her persona, that of the aging cowgirl who runs a Reno dude ranch for potential divorcées in *The Women*. This bellowing commoner caught Metro’s attention, and Main was considered as a possible co-star for Beery, who was skeptical. Marie Dressler had

been more subtle, he felt, and he was never eager to share billing with anyone. But the pair clicked on-screen, and Main was signed to a seven-year contract at MGM. For nine years, Beery and Main were a popular team, money in the bank, an example of how one bonus star (Beery) creates a need for a co-star that generates another (Main). Their movies were all programmers, and always returned a neat profit. Besides *Wyoming* in 1939, Beery and Main starred in *Barnacle Bill* (1941), *The Bugle Sounds* (1942), *Jackass Mail* (1942), *Rationing* (1944), *Bad Bascomb* (1946), and their final film, *Big Jack*, in 1949. (Beery had a fatal heart attack not long after this film was completed.)

The difference between Marjorie Main and Marie Dressler as a leading lady for Beery was one of sincerity. Dressler and Beery pioneered the concept of the unattractive older couple as romantic leads, but by the time Main entered the picture, Beery's roles had become caricatures. Main was forced to play a stereotypical old shrew, trying to trap the unwilling Beery into her bed. In order to offset Beery's increasingly broad style, Main coarsened her performance. Where she was a charming hillbilly hostess with a little cowgirl swagger in *The Women*, playing with Beery developed her as a man-eating harridan (although never a rum pot; Main opposed drinking and asked not to be required to drink hard liquor in her films, a request that, with a few exceptions, was granted). Her voice went lower and ever more raspy to challenge Beery's vocal strength. Her trademark became a disbelieving snort of disgust, and it worked. The role became her basic type. Even when she was allowed to wear elaborate costumes and play in sophisticated material, as in Lubitsch's 1943 *Heaven Can Wait*, she was still a nouveau-riche dame with a down-to-earth cackle. Main understood what audiences wanted, and accepted her fate, always a prerequisite for extended movie success. "I hit my stride in the Wally Beery films and the Ma Kettle roles because I knew instinctively what would be true to the parts."* Main became limited in a way that Dressler never did, but who knows what might have happened to Dressler had she lived longer?

An oddity like Beery didn't always have to romance his own kind—he was too big a star for that. Beery's career demonstrates how oddities could influence the careers of other performers, not only other unlikely types such as Dressler and Main but also beautiful female stars like Joan Crawford and Harlow. Both actresses took big steps forward by being paired with Beery, not only because he himself was a star, but also because his offbeat qualities liberated and allowed them to be seen to fuller advantage. Crawford showed she could be as tough or villainous as the business wanted her to be, and Harlow showed her rowdy comedic side, her own low-class appeal.

In *Grand Hotel*, Beery and the young, sexy Crawford seem to understand each other perfectly: He's "hired" her for the night and is trying to be smoothly considerate, but she knows it's a low-down deal and just winds his clock, accepting her fate. As one watches them in their adjoining hotel rooms, it's easy to believe they both have been there before. Crawford's supposed to be a better person than Beery, but no better than she should be. Their scenes together are flawless.

Paired with the luminous young Jean Harlow in *Dinner at Eight*, Beery adjusts his bombast to hers. Together they make the most perfect white-trash, nouveau-riche couple *ever*. Billie Burke, their potential hostess, describes Harlow as "that common little woman" and Beery as "that noisy, vulgar man... he *smells* Oklahoma!" Harlow and Beery deliver on that. She plays a female who has her priorities straight. Getting ready for the party, she yells, "Don't talk to me while I'm doing my lashes!" and snarls at her maid to "Put 'em [her orchids] in the icebox, nitwit!" Harlow slinks even when she's lying flat on her back in an all-white bed, or maybe especially then. She inhabits an all-white world, with only a box of dark chocolates to break the monotony. She literally shimmers, and she knows what she wants. ("I'm gonna be a lady if it kills me!") Beery is ill-bred, bad-mannered, and badly dressed, flashing a diamond ring and ornate silk scarf. He doesn't even take his hat off in Lionel Barrymore's office, barging around and yelling, "What kinda dump is this?"

When Harlow and Beery quarrel, Beery's stardom has probably never had a bigger test. Can he hold his corner of the screen when the Blonde Bombshell is in the frame pouting, screaming, "How da ya get that way?" at him, and then turning all the sexual energy she's got on him? The Harlow-Beery fights are epic, with no attempt to pretty them up. "You poisonous little rattlesnake, you," he yells. "You big gas bag," she yells back. Harlow is magnificent. She tells Beery off when he wants to stand her up to go to Washington: "Presidents in Washington and all those rummies, but you can't go anywhere with me!" Flatly refused, she knows what to do—fall back against her heart-shaped white pillow and do her thing—talk baby talk and pretend to be his little kitty. Beery is wise enough to make room for Harlow. Up against her, he gives ground in the way only the shrewdest of actors give ground.

The long and unpredictably successful career of Wallace Beery (a perfect last name for his characters) sums up the rules the star machine followed in exploiting the creation of bonuses it stumbled across. First, whatever narrow niche an odd personality first appealed to audiences in, keep it. Make that the star's defined type. Second, broaden it as much as possible to make more money from it by using it in any genre. Can it work in musicals? Westerns? Melodramas if it's comedic, and comedies if it's tragic? What else can you get out of it at the box office? And third, repeat all the elements from the successful film that defined the "bonus" popularity with the masses as often as you can in any setting that you can. Last, and this was related to the efficiency of the business and its maintained roster of players, offset any weakness that might appear as the years passed by surrounding the oddity with opposites. In Beery's case, that meant maybe putting in a young couple to provide the youth and beauty he lacked. It maybe meant broadening his appeal to women, who might otherwise reject him, by having him play opposite a child star. It certainly meant having the nerve to trust the audience who had picked him out in the first place. MGM compensated for Beery's lack of good looks by putting him front and center, often in close-ups, in almost every scene in his

movies. The studio fully understood that it was *his* ugly mug the paying customers wanted to see.

Bad Bascomb (1946) demonstrates all these points. The story is perfect for the aging Beery. He plays a “bad” man who undergoes a humanizing process, a kind of de-uglifying of Wallace Beery. The system builds its vehicle around him, both using him and shoring him up. Beery can carry the load, but he’s also working with a safety net. Marshall Thompson and Frances Rafferty provide a youthful romance. Marjorie Main expands the comedy. The story is a favorite genre of its time, a western, with a comforting wagon-train plot that provides plenty of action and drama to go with the humor. And child star Margaret O’Brien sits in Beery’s lap and tells him she loves him and is going to marry him when she grows up. O’Brien’s love for Beery’s character softens him and sentimentalizes him. It’s all schmaltz, tried and true. In the end, however, the movie validates Beery. After killing a man (to help his friends, of course), he has to be taken away by the federal marshal. In a teary finale, Beery promises little O’Brien that he will “catch up later.” She knows better. “I’ll never see you again,” she wails, “I just know it.” And, in fact, in that astonishingly cruel way of Hollywood’s that people so easily forget, she never *does* see him again. He’s taken away to be hanged. The End. No happy ending with Beery, all grins and golly-gee, riding up to the old wagon train and giving little Maggie a big hug. Not having a sudden about-face plot device gave real credibility to Wallace Beery’s playing of Bascomb—and to the definition of his stardom, and MGM knew the star business. Oddities had to remain oddities to the very end of the picture. The business respected the audience’s oddball choice.

MICKEY ROONEY



Mickey Rooney

Mickey Rooney was in many ways a younger version of Wallace Beery. Rooney had talent to burn, and he burned it. His was a seemingly endless supply of natural resources that would never dry up but were ruined by excessive use and abuse, by his own arrogance and sense of power. He could sing, dance, play the drums and the piano, do comic imitations of the greats of the day like Gable and Lionel Barrymore, fall down in punishing slapstick routines, dress up like Carmen Miranda and boom-chick around, and, finally, act in a serious role. Whatever was needed, he could do. Rooney starred in vaudeville, radio, legitimate theatre, nightclubs, state fairs, ad campaigns, movies, and television. He has done everything there is to do in show business, all with equal success, and, it might be said, equal failure.

Clarence Brown, a major director in the 1930s and 1940s, who directed Rooney in an Academy Award-nominated performance in *The Human Comedy* (1943), said, "Mickey Rooney is the closest thing to a genius that I ever worked with. There was Chaplin, then there was Rooney. The little bastard could do no wrong in my

book...All you had to do with him was rehearse it once.” It might be said that Mickey Rooney is one movie star who really defines the term, yet he’s an oddity: a guy too short, too goofy, too youthful looking, and too unromantic ever to make it, much less last the way he did. He was born to be a sidekick but became a star. The bottom line of Hollywood oddball stardom has to be Mickey Rooney, a real bonus payoff in the system.

Rooney’s golden era brought him money, fame, and many accolades. In 1938 he was awarded an honorary Oscar “for bringing to the screen the spirit and personification of youth” and “for setting a high standard of ability and achievement.” He was nominated for Best Actor in both 1939 (for *Babes in Arms*) and 1943 (for *The Human Comedy*). In 1940, at the age of twenty, he had it all and then some, but before the decade was over, he was a show business throwaway. He himself said, “I starred in eight pictures in 1938. In 1948 and 1949 together, I starred in only three.” Despite being nominated for an Oscar as Best Supporting Actor in 1956 for *The Bold and the Brave*, he kept his career alive in the 1950s only by the seat of his pants. He appeared in nightclubs and on television, and formed his own independent production company, but not one of the movies that were made, all starring him, was really successful. By 1962, he was bankrupt. (Rooney said, “I was a has-been.”) Because he married and divorced seven times and had developed a drinking problem, he became a joke and was on his way to both oblivion and tragedy.* He was a little boy who could do anything who became an adult who did too much of the wrong things.

Rooney was born in a trunk in 1920 as Joe Yule Jr. By 1926, he was out there trouping, playing a midget with a cigar in a two-reeler called *Not to Be Trusted*. As of this writing in 2006, at the age of eighty-six, he’s *still* trouping, and will no doubt troupe onward after death. If there’s a way to play the ghost in *Hamlet* when you *are* a ghost, Rooney’ll be there. When he appeared on Broadway in *Sugar Babies* in the early 1980s, I attended just to say I had actually seen him in person. His biography in the Playbill was brief. All it said was, “Mickey Rooney...formerly Andy Hardy...formerly Mickey McGuire...formerly Joe Yule Jr.” In between the names lay a

lifetime of show business. The Rooney story is the complete history of twentieth-century performance. He started as a showbiz kid, the “junior” to a successful vaudevillian, then broke into the movies about the time most children were starting school. He found success in a popular series based on the *Toonerville Trolley* comic strip by playing a character named Mickey McGuire. He legally changed his name to cash in, and became “Mickey McGuire as himself” in more than sixty shorts between 1927 and 1934. After continuing to work for three more years, he changed his name to Mickey Rooney because the *Toonerville Trolley* comic strip people threatened to sue. In 1937, he made his thirty-seventh feature, an MGM movie called *A Family Affair*, playing a character named Andy Hardy, and by 1938 he ranked in the top ten box office stars of the year, a rating he maintained through 1944. Everything about him is summed up by the four names—Yule, McGuire, Hardy, and Rooney—including loss of identity and the need to become someone else to succeed.



Mickey Rooney found lasting fame when he undertook the role of a typical American teenage boy, Andy Hardy, in a series of movies about venerable Judge James Hardy (Lewis Stone) and his family.

TOP: Andy and Dad have one of their famous heart-to-heart talks in the judge's den, with suitable subjects being money, cars, girls, and Mom (*Andy Hardy Gets Spring Fever*).



Rooney's frequent co-star was Judy Garland, who was first teamed with him in the *Hardy* series playing Betsy Booth (*Andy Hardy Meets Debutante*).

There was every reason in the world that such a progression should not happen for Rooney. He had become famous as a child star, and few can make the transition to adulthood on-screen successfully. Furthermore, he was burned out as Mickey McGuire and so closely associated with the role that shaking it off seemed impossible. His big leap to stardom as Andy Hardy, a typical teenager, should have mired him in that role exclusively, or at least left him there when he aged. His talent kept it from happening. Not only is Rooney a movie oddity as a star, his whole career trajectory is an oddity.

Rooney's fame today lies partly in his musicals co-starring Judy Garland, but mostly in his signature role as Andy Hardy in the series of fourteen films about Judge James Hardy (Lewis Stone) and his

Carvel, Ohio, family. The judge's son, Andy Hardy, defined the American boy of the 1930s, and no consideration of today's teen movies can forget that all teen movies are grounded in Mickey Rooney as Andy. Rooney defined both the all-American boy look *and* the all-American boy behavior: brash, confident, pushy, yet no matter how spoiled or rotten, having the right stuff underneath. A Rooney boy's head could be turned by flatterers, money, or a pretty blonde, but in the end he was going to do the right thing. Andy Hardy was a "Gee, Dad" kind of role, and Rooney gave an all-out "Gee, Dad" kind of performance, frequently falling down stairs and mugging his head off in a maddening manner. Yet every *Hardy* film had a moment of true credibility—highly unlikely yet credible. "Look, Dad. I'm in an awful jam. Can I talk to you man to man?" Hardy would ask the old judge, who would respond with a gentle smile and a "suppose we start from the beginning" patience. Everyone laughs at these scenes, but even in their own time they were hard to make work, requiring careful writing and impeccable performances. Stone adopts an attitude of amused tolerance, balanced against the eager and sincere enthusiasm Rooney thrusts at him. The two of them are always in the judge's study with the door closed when they talk it all out. Dad listens carefully and treats Andy's small problem as an important milestone in his son's progress toward manhood. The way sober old Dad sees it, it may be about not having enough money to pay for a car today, but it will be bankruptcy tomorrow if he doesn't dispense wisdom. And dispense he does. Dad is very tough, as befitting the original Depression-era mentality behind these movies. He has the same standards in his home as he does in his law court, which means the Andy Hardy movies are grounded in morality. Rooney plays with simplicity and sincerity in these "Dad" scenes. He drops the mugging. In fact, Stone and Rooney are great together, and there was a reason these low-budget movies were so popular. Today, people complain, "There never was a family like the Hardys." That was the point. The Hardys were an idealized family, set inside a faux realism. Andy was a moving photograph of a comic strip.

The first movie that presented Rooney as Andy Hardy was not really an Andy Hardy movie at all. *A Family Affair* was about two things: the American family as a unit and the American small town as the center of our value system. It's also about maintaining the status quo—old-fashioned family values, marriage, neighborly friendships, respecting one's elders, and, of course, Judge Hardy. There is a simple, direct quality to the narrative. It has conviction. Louis B. Mayer understood that middle-class viewers just coming out of a Depression that had rocked their daily lives would want movies that reestablished their sense of “nice, ordinary” small-town American life. The movie introduced fans to the Hardy folks—the wise old judge, his kindly homebody wife, his spinster sister who lived with them, and his three children: Andy, a teenager, and his two older sisters, Joan, who is married, and Marion, away at college. (Thankfully, there's no dog or happy black maid named Orchid or Sapphire.)

Lionel Barrymore plays the judge. None of the principal actors was billed above the title. It was “Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer presents *A Family Affair*,” and the next title card listed the cast members. Barrymore, the biggest name, was listed first in slightly larger letters than the others, and his name was followed by Cecilia Parker (whom MGM was hoping to make into a star), Eric Linden,^{*} and then Mickey Rooney in fourth place. In fact, Rooney had been added into the cast mix casually, a solid pro to play the small role of the family's youngest son. The young actor the film was really trying to showcase and develop as a star was Eric Linden, an early version of Lon McCallister. Linden had been previously featured in *Ah, Wilderness!* (1935) and was MGM's candidate to become the perfect all-American teenager for their films. It is one of stardom's ironies that the “bonus” guy who *would* fulfill that role—Rooney—was right under their noses. Linden was capable but colorless, and not especially good-looking. Although he could hold his own with actors like Barrymore, which is why the star machine was working on him, he was an unrealistically *proper* young teenager. He was the type studios had under contract to be “typical” before they figured out that “typical” was a homely kid with unruly hair and awkward

manners like Andy Hardy. As Marion Hardy's beau, Linden was the anti-Hardy. He wore suits and ties, and his hair was always perfectly in place. He took being young too seriously. Rooney signaled to teenagers that life was fun, even though their worries might seem real. To look at Linden is to see why Rooney succeeded. Rooney's hair sticks out in all directions and always needs combing. His clothes are naturalistic—the sweaters and letter jackets real kids wore. He runs into a room, trips over himself, falls downstairs, and talks in slang. (Linden delivers full sentences with correct grammar.) Rooney is messy but always tries to remember to tuck his shirt in and slick down his hair. He's rumpled and real—a breath of fresh air. Today, no one has heard of Eric Linden. Everybody knows Mickey Rooney.

The film opens up like a play. Marion is coming home for the first time since she enrolled in college, and the Hardys are about to have their three children together again around the dinner table for the first time in months. Dinner preparations are in the works. Everyone is bustling around. Within the first five minutes, three main story lines are swiftly and economically introduced: Joan has marital problems; Marion has a serious new boyfriend; the judge is in conflict with a city plan to build a new aqueduct. (Andy doesn't appear until most of this is under way.)

The full character and plot structure is in place for what will become the *Andy Hardy* series, but the formula has not yet emerged. For instance, when the judge takes a family member into his well-known study, the center for the dispensation of all parental wisdom, it's not Andy who needs the talk but his sister Joan (Julie Haydon). Both Judge *and* Mrs. Hardy participate, presumably because it is a daughter in trouble. Joan confesses to her parents that she has split from her husband, although she had always dreamed of a marriage like the one they have. Weeping, she tells them that, well, she's gotten bored by her husband. And, well, she went out to the Blue Rabbit, a low-down roadhouse. With another man. (This all spools out very slowly, since Judge and Mrs. Hardy can apparently only absorb one thing at a time.) Finally she comes out with the real problem. There was a private room, kissing, and her husband

bursting in, followed by a fistfight. “Oh!” cries out Mrs. Hardy. “I’m going to go right into the kitchen and make you a nice cup of hot cocoa!” This sort of thing often makes people misunderstand the appeal of the *Hardy* films to their original audiences. Viewers, no matter how small the town, would have known all about Blue Rabbits, boredom, and kisses, not to mention nice cups of hot cocoa. No one was surprised, but everyone was reassured. If Blue Rabbits could happen in Carvel to the most honorable judge in the universe and his noble wife and kids, well, it certainly could happen in their burg to them and their motley crew. (And, of course, it had.)

A Family Affair was a low-budget feature that ran only sixty-nine minutes. It made a potful of money and received favorable reviews. It also kicked off a storm of fan mail, especially about the young son, Andy, and Rooney’s performance. The public had fallen in love with Andy Hardy and MGM had a bonus star on their hands.*

Metro surveyed the situation. Why not just make another one of these *Hardy* films? Cast members besides Barrymore, Rooney, Parker, Haydon, and Linden had included Spring Byington as Mrs. Hardy, Sara Haden as the spinster aunt, and Margaret Marquis as Polly Benedict, who would later become important as Andy’s girlfriend. There was no need to worry about repeating actors, except, of course, for the one audiences had singled out: Mickey Rooney. Any minor players who were available—Cecilia Parker and Sara Haden—were also recast, and everyone else was replaced. Fay Holden became Mrs. Hardy, and Ann Rutherford became Polly. (The public hadn’t taken to the Hardy sisters. Julie Haydon disappeared and Cecilia Parker was soon to follow.)

MGM quickly cranked out two more *Hardy* films: *You’re Only Young Once* (1937) and *Judge Hardy’s Children* (1938). They amped the running time for *You’re Only Young Once* up to seventy-eight minutes. By the time it was in theatres and cast and crew were at work on *Judge Hardy’s Children*, the third film in the series was planned to run at 102 minutes. Most important, the studio knew what it had: Andy Hardy. By the fourth movie, *Love Finds Andy Hardy* (1938), the series revolved around Mickey Rooney, and after *Out West with the Hardys* (1938) and *The Hardys Ride High* (1939),

every movie had “Andy Hardy” in the title (although one was called *Judge Hardy and Son*, 1939). All sixteen *Andy Hardy* films starred Mickey Rooney. No one else ever played the role. Rooney owned it, and he not only became a big movie star as a result—he became Andy Hardy. Or Andy Hardy became him.

As MGM moved to create the *Hardy* films, the story formula was figured out. The small town of Carvel, Ohio, would always be the primary setting. Two parallel plots would be united: one that would test the judge’s character and involve him in saving Carvel from some potential threat to its integrity; one involving Andy’s maturation process, particularly in regard to his love life, which would require the wisdom of his father to solve.

Love Finds Andy Hardy earned nearly three times what the earlier films had, and the *Hardy* series became a major focus for MGM. Louis B. Mayer himself kept a tight rein on the series, admonishing writers to figure out what Judge Hardy’s salary might be in real life, and telling designers to decorate the house and choose the clothing the characters wore to reflect things they could really have afforded. (Judge Hardy was supposed to be making about \$3,500 per year.) Mayer’s rules were: the children could speak their minds but never be disrespectful or interrupt their parents; the Hardys would never go into debt; and the judge and his wife would never argue in front of the children.

After the first two or three movies, this formula was set in stone. Each movie picked up where the previous one left off, providing audiences with a smooth sense of ongoing family life. Each always reminded everyone of the setting: “Carvel, Ohio, Population 25,000.” (Even when the Hardys went out west for a vacation, or to New York or Washington, the movies opened up in their Carvel home.) As the series progressed, the ability to smoothly move viewers into the story, set up or reestablish the characters was astonishing. *Judge Hardy and Son*, a 1939 entry, opens up on the judge in his chambers, followed swiftly by the move to Andy outside the family home, patching an inner tube on his jalopy’s tires. (This action is as arcane to today’s teenagers as anything to be found in Shakespeare.) A few minutes of running time is used to remind

everyone that Andy is “typical”—he works on his car, worries about not having any money, respects his parents, and thinks about girls. A few more minutes are used to remind everyone that the Hardys are “typical” and also “proper”—Andy is asked to put on a jacket and tie for family dinner, and the judge’s voice at the table is the voice of authority. Then the little plot—an elderly couple are threatened with eviction—and the big plot—Mrs. Hardy will become seriously ill—can get under way. It was efficient, smart factory filmmaking sustained by the presence of a singularly popular movie star: Mickey Rooney. Because he looked like a real kid—short, kinda ordinary, a little bit cute, and a little bit homely—he was perfect. He was superconfident inside the frame, and his clothes, his car, his manners, and his successes and failures were all grounded in something easy and natural. On the screen, he was a sixteen-year-old boy looking to find out who he was and learn the ways of the world, relying on his old dad to guide him. Offscreen, Rooney was nineteen, but he might as well have been fifty. He had his own bookie. The “Gee whiz, Dad” life of Andy Hardy was something Rooney had never been within a cigar’s length of.

Rooney’s career might have lived and died with Andy Hardy, except that between 1938 and 1944, his years of maximum popularity, MGM had him doing a great deal more. A lesser talent would have just been Andy Hardy, and grateful. But Rooney also played in a series of other famous movies. In 1938, he appeared opposite Spencer Tracy (as Father Flanagan) in the top box office hit *Boys Town*. Rooney plays as if he’s a junior James Cagney, without Cagney’s sly little touch of humor to make him likable. Rooney’s a little shit—mean, selfish, seemingly unredeemable. His performance presents the horror of a real juvenile delinquent, a bullying youngster whose sociopathic nature shows audiences just what the country is up against when kids go wild. His ultimate redemption is downright silly. No one could have gotten a hold on that kid Rooney first puts up on the screen.

Rooney also played young Tom Edison in a film of the same name (1940) and Huckleberry Finn in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1939). He was utterly heartbreaking as the young boy in *The*

Human Comedy (1943) who works for Western Union delivering the telegrams that tell families their loved ones have been killed in the war. His solid portrayal of the former jockey who teaches young Elizabeth Taylor to ride in *National Velvet* (1944) is the performance that makes the story work. Rooney's experience grounds Taylor's amateur status and keeps us from noticing that it's her beauty, not her acting, that we're appreciating. Rooney is fondly remembered for these movies, but the roles that stand out alongside his *Hardy* films are his musicals opposite Judy Garland. Without Garland, a part of Rooney's legend wouldn't exist, and the same can be said for hers.

Garland and Rooney appeared together in three *Hardy* films (*Love Finds Andy Hardy*, *Andy Hardy Meets Debutante*, and *Life Begins for Andy Hardy*). She's a recurring character named Betsy Booth. But it was their co-starring "let's all put on a show" musicals that gave them their real popularity as a movie team. There were four of them: *Babes in Arms* (1939), *Strike Up the Band* (1940), *Babes on Broadway* (1941), and *Girl Crazy* (1943).*

In their musicals, Rooney and Garland blend their hysteria, synchronize their insane energy, and bond forever as child stars on the edge: the edge of maturity, the edge of success and/or failure, and just plain the edge. Coming as they do from messy backgrounds and lives as performing tots, they seem to be in a performance space all their own, one that no one but them is good enough to get into, yet one we can all respond to and appreciate. In *Girl Crazy* (1943), they do a number allegedly set on a dusty southwestern road in which they try to restart a broken-down jalopy. They have to get out, try to fix the car, move the car forward, jump in and out of it, and finally, Rooney has to run alongside, singing to Garland "Can You Use Me?" It's a patter song in which he begs her to like him, and she tells him he's a jerk (an American love song). Like the best of movie star singers, both know how to really act a lyric without losing the musical beat and pitch. Everything they do is a work of art. They're peerless.

In the mid-1960s, Rooney beaches up on Garland's soon-to-be-defunct television show. She's thin as a rail, shaky. He's overweight

and slightly sleazy. He's become a has-been whose career has gone up and down more times than any yo-yo, while she's notorious for her addictions and unreliability. People tune in just to see if she can get through an hour without collapsing. There they are: Garland and Rooney, America's former teen idols. Each is looking into the eyes of the one other person who can fully understand what they've been through and what it's really like to be who they are. They've tapped and sung their way to hell and back. It's a moment of showbiz immortality. (Garland will be dead at the age of forty-seven, but Rooney will have a complete career rebirth.)

In March 1944, Rooney joined the army and did what many actors managed to avoid: He served his country. Originally classified as 4-F, he asked for a reclassification and entered the 6817th Special Services Battalion, serving in Europe as a private. Rooney is an authentic World War II veteran. When he returned to Hollywood, MGM, his home studio, was a changed place, and by 1949 he was forced to become a freelancer. The pickings were slim for an aging all-American boy, but Rooney hadn't been born in a trunk for nothing. He kept on trucking. He always *could* act, so he became a reliable character actor in movies and found acclaim in television. Just as 1962 was winding down, he showed his depth as an actor in the film version of *Requiem for a Heavyweight*, with Anthony Quinn and Jackie Gleason. By '62, Rooney has a weathered and battered face. There's nothing of Andy Hardy left. The bouncing, overconfident teenager is gone. He plays a low-key, reactive character whose wordless looks say more than all of the rest of the dialogue. He's a guy who understands failure, who knows what it's like to have been on top and have to keep going after the good times have ended. Rooney had lived it, and he knew how to play it. He used what he had—and climbed back into the saddle again, something he would begin doing over and over in the coming years—up one year, down the next, but never giving up. He wrote his autobiography, taught acting classes, pursued various business ventures, and took roles whenever and wherever he could find them. He gave up star billing; if it was available, he took it, and if

not, he accepted less. In his autobiography, *Life Is Too Short*, he cheerfully recounted some of his bizarre attempts to make a living during his down periods: he took a “flyer in oil”; started a company called Lovely Lady Cosmetics; invented a perfume called Taming of the Shrew; put spray-on hair inside an aerosol can to be sold to bald men; started a pharmaceutical company called Elim-N-Ache; and invented a round hot dog with a hole in the middle so you could put it on a hamburger bun (the Weenie Whirl). For the latter, he created special toppings so he could sell the Erich von Weenie (with sauerkraut), the Pancho Weenie (with chili), or the Surfboard Weenie (with raisins and pineapple). At least he never lost his sense of humor—or his optimism. And no matter what he did offscreen or on, the public never deserted him. (Perhaps he built up so many reserves of goodwill from Andy Hardy—and from trucking alongside Judy Garland—that nothing could ever spoil him for audiences.)



Andy Hardy's gone! Mickey Rooney's a long way from Carvel, Ohio, in movies like *Machine Gun Kelly*



The Bold and the Brave, with Wendell Corey.

The final irony of Rooney's career came in October 1979, when he returned to Broadway in a musical (with another movie veteran, Ann Miller) that no one thought had a chance. Called *Sugar Babies*, it was a pastiche of old burlesque routines, cornball humor, and leggy girls parading around in gauze and garter belts. Against all odds, it became a big hit, and Rooney was back on top. In a one-year period, he was nominated for a Tony for *Sugar Babies*, a supporting actor Oscar for his role in *The Black Stallion*, and an Emmy for the TV movie *Bill*, in which he plays a mentally retarded man. In 1982, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences again awarded him with an honorary Oscar, this time "in recognition of his sixty years of versatility in a variety of memorable film performances."

There is no other career like Rooney's. Child star to character actor with stops along the way at American icon, leading man, and

award-winning actor, he's a true oddity—a combination of Shirley Temple, Laurence Olivier, and Gene Kelly rolled into one. He should never have survived child stardom, should never have survived Andy Hardy, should never have survived being typed as a “boy” in musicals, should probably never have survived World War II, should never have survived his career slumps and his eight marriages and his personal peccadilloes—just plain should never have survived, period. He was an oddity in every era, in every role yet managed to keep going and keep himself alive in the business he was born into. It's called talent. In the end, the public knows it, wants it, and Rooney always had it.*



Mickey Rooney

CHARACTER ACTORS

Moviegoers in the golden age loved second-level character players. They loved them so much, in fact, that the filmmaking business often capitalized on that popularity by creating low-budget movies to star a particular character in a feature. This did not mean that the character stopped being a character and moved onto the star roster.

It only meant the business saw a chance to make an extra buck, a bonus buck as it were, off the public's affection, by bestowing on the character a pseudo stardom or a temporary fame, since it was the character and not the actor the public wanted.

The bonus phenomenon of the star turn by a character actor is a subtle distinction that created a short-term profit out of starring someone who wasn't a star, which is not the same thing as creating a star out of an "oddity." Oddities worked up the ladder toward stardom, as when Wallace Beery developed himself into a leading actor, as when Clifton Webb played two or three roles that elevated him, as when Mickey Rooney grew up to stardom. A character actor was a specialized entity that arrived at the level of character and was expected to stay there, making a solid living.

To understand the role of the character actor, it's important to understand that all studios had a specific, clearly defined pay scale for their employees, including actors. Performers in movies were subjected to employment levels just as the employees inside any factory would be.

Movie studios kept under contract only the roster of actors they regularly needed. There were three categories: stars,* character actors, and supporting players. Everybody else—bit part players, extras, or "specialties" (certain dance acts, comedians, skilled cowboy horsemen, whatever)—were usually hired on as needed. "Extras" were exactly that—extra people needed briefly for large crowd scenes, street scenes, mobs, et cetera, or for one brief role. They were hired for the day or a few days from Central Casting, and they were listed by categories: dress men, juveniles, bellhops, bald men, police, collegiates, butlers, beards, riders, freaks, tall men, short men, homely women, dowagers, Hawaiians, sickly children. For instance, there was a category called "hags," broken down into: hags with warts, hags with big noses, youngish hags, older hags, hags with twisted mouths, hags with puffy eyes, hags with twisted mouths *and* puffy eyes. There were snake charmers who worked without live snakes and snake charmers who worked with live snakes (Have Snake, Will Travel). In 1935, there were seventeen

thousand extras listed by defined type and capability, but only about seven thousand of them worked regularly.

Some film historians break the levels of hiring inside a studio down into even smaller categories: stars, featured players, character actors, supporting players, B-level actors, short-term contract “stars,” freelancers, stars of short subjects, and so on.[†] To explain how stars were manufactured, however, the minute details of differentiating employment levels can be simplified to star, character, and support.

Men, women, kids, dogs, or any other animals could “arrive” in any category. For instance, whereas Greta Garbo, Shirley Temple, and Lassie were stars, Gladys Cooper, Butch Jenkins, and Velvet the Horse were supporting players, and Edward Everett Horton, George “Foghorn” Wilson, and Cheetah the Chimp were “character actors.” Each category played its role for the studio factory.

There was a reason why studios kept particular characters and support players on payroll. Although the stars were the most important economically and were given the most attention, character actors and supporting players were needed to surround them. If you had a Garbo under contract, you needed a Gustav von Seyffertitz—exotic to exotic, foreign to foreign. If you had Errol Flynn, you’d want Alan Hale and Frank McHugh, Irish cutup to Irish cutup. And all movies needed variety in casting, what Billy Wilder referred to as “a bit of vegetable.” To consider the star-making phenomenon and to “read” the definition of any star, you needed to see who their studio surrounded them with.

In old Hollywood, character actor and supporting player differed in that a character actor was famous for only one characterization, whereas a supporting player took on many different kinds of roles, and a character actor often appeared in the movie just to do a “star turn” in a role that had only one big scene. In contrast, a supporting player usually portrayed a character who was present for the total filmed story, or at least was important to its overall plot.*

Character actors were sometimes known as the studio’s “stock company.” These are the people who make viewers ask, Who’s that

guy? If my husband suddenly says to me, “Who’s that guy?”, all I have to do is ask him, “Movie guy or real guy?” If he says “movie guy,” I know the answer immediately. It’s S. Z. “Cuddles” Sakall, because that’s the movie guy whose name my husband can never remember. For one of my colleagues, the answer is always William Demarest. Sakall and Demarest are classic examples of Hollywood’s best character actors. Sakall perfected the role of the “Sheeeeeesh”-meister, an exasperated but kindly Hungarian type who slapped his fat cheeks in amazement at key plot moments (“Sheeeeeeeesh!”) and who fractured the English language while breaking eggs in one of his many movie restaurants. Demarest was always cranky. He kicked his own daughter in the butt in *The Miracle of Morgan’s Creek* (1944), warning her, “Someday someone is going to murder you. There’ll be nothing left but a hair ribbon and a bone...the mystery of Morgan’s Creek.”*

Character actors were valuable because they filled out a movie, backed up weak stars, and endeared themselves to audiences who looked forward to their particular shtick. In their own way, they *were* stars. Character actors played a character—and one character only. They defined and refined a type they were then identified with, and audiences accepted them as that person. In other words, like top movie stars, they had a special type they had carved out for themselves that the audience wanted them to be. Franklin Pangborn would show up as a tutti-frutti hairdresser and disappear. Mary Wickes would arrive as a visiting nurse, huff around in her sensible white shoes, insulting her patient, and then go away. Edward Everett Horton would forget where he was going or where he had been and then go somewhere else. Such character actors were recognized by name, had their own fan clubs, were advertised in the trailers and posters for a film, and were written about in fan magazines (just not in the front pages).

Character actors were fixed story units. Their character did not develop, change, or provide surprises. Their performances were never stretched into something new. “Departure” was not in the character actor’s catalogue; delivering the familiar, the expected, *was*. (Billie Burke, a character actress famous for her high-society

dithering around a well-appointed dinner table, wasn't suddenly going to "depart" this comedy role and be cast as Mrs. Danvers.)

Sometimes two different character actors perfected the same basic shtick. For instance, Chill Wills and Slim Pickens both were "rubes"—astonished, befuddled, and twangy. They are not the same person, but they might as well be. What's even more confusing about them is that Slim isn't particularly skinny and Chill is certainly not cool. In popularity, Slim has the edge on Chill today because it is Slim (not Chill) who rides the big bomb downward at the end of *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), wearing a cowboy hat and whooping like a banshee. In their day, Chill probably had the edge on Slim because he (Chill, not Slim) played in A-level films (always as a rube, of course) alongside big stars like Norma Shearer, Ginger Rogers, Gene Tierney, and Judy Garland. (Neither Slim nor Chill should ever be confused with the yokel Andy Devine, of course.)

Today, the designations of "character" and "support" are nonexistent or totally flexible. Stars are not locked into one or the other. We toss the terms around and violate the categories as needed. You can read in a magazine or newspaper that actor "Brad Pitt is really a character actor." This doesn't mean that the writer seriously thinks Pitt is Chill Wills. It means he is being compared favorably to serious and humanistic actors like Steve Buscemi and John Turturro. It means we're supposed to take Pitt more seriously than we do. (By old industry standards, of course, Buscemi and Turturro would be supporting players, because they are not usually leading men, and they play varied kinds of roles.)

When a character actor became so popular that the public formed fan clubs, the business would sometimes let him or her step up to carry a movie. It was bonus time. Obviously, since they *were* "types," the business *could* feature them if the public so desired. Sydney Greenstreet and Peter Lorre, forever linked in audience's minds by their roles in *The Maltese Falcon* and *Casablanca*, were asked to co-headline two 1946 films, *The Verdict* and *Three Strangers* (Geraldine Fitzgerald was the third). Thelma Ritter, the wisest of the female wiseacres, headlined *The Model and the Marriage Broker* (1951). Charles Coburn, who was more lovable than you needed

him to be, was paired with the lovely Spring Byington in a romantic comedy for the geriatric set, *Louisa* (1951). Most character actors never experienced this phenomenon, nor would it have been their goal. It was also *not* the goal of the studios, who had signed their characters to be their characters.

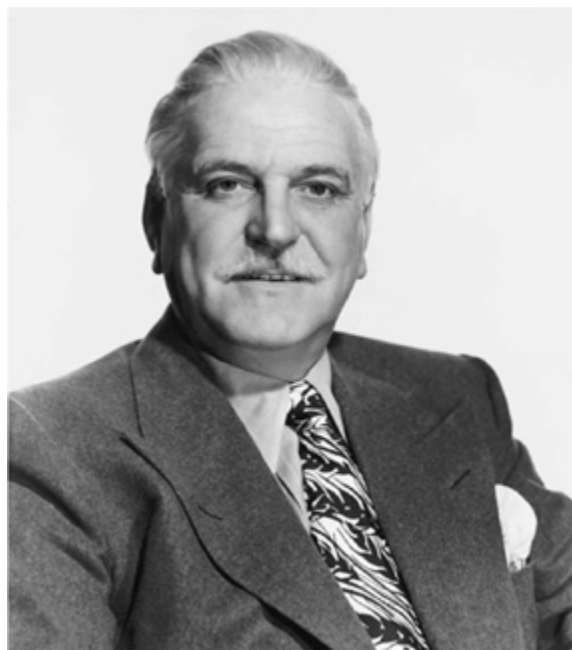
There was, for the character actor, an additional casting brass ring—a bonus bonus. A truly popular character might be asked to headline a B-level series in which the leading role was actually just their own type elevated. Being given such a series didn't reduce an actor's workload—it increased it—and it didn't stop the studio from continuing to cast them in A films as their established “self.” It simply meant they'd make more money for their studio. It was a business ploy. Studios coldly calculated the risks involved, weighed the character's popularity, and decided that since they had the actor under contract, and since the public loved his or her character so much, it was worthwhile to set up a cheap B-film series, or perhaps a run of unrelated movies, to use any downtime.*

Few character actors were lifted up to star in series movies. Examples include Guy Kibbee, famous for his lecherous old men, who played Scattergood Bains; Harold Peary, who was the Great Gildersleeve; and Jean Hersholt, who played the beloved Minnesota physician Dr. Christian in six independent movies.† The intrepid Edna May Oliver played the amateur detective Hildegard Withers in three successful films: *The Penguin Pool Murder*, *Murder on the Blackboard* (both in 1934), and *Murder on a Honeymoon* (1935). Oliver was one of the best female character actors of the studio system. She represented the prototypical spinster, a sharp-tongued, sharp-witted, and sharp-elbowed living terror. For American audiences, that made her lovable. She sassed and complained and pricked and bullied. She was the spinster who sees the truth and pronounces it loudly. Oliver, born in 1883, had a long and successful stage career as well as a top-ranked movie life.* She was a strong and consistent presence, easily adapting her type to any genre, any mood, any period. No matter what the movie was about, Oliver's character did the same thing: She gave a hearty and

disdainful sniff, arched an eyebrow meaningfully, and shrugged a shoulder dismissively, all with an undercurrent of sympathetic intelligence. This never seemed to make her performing clichéd. She successfully used her type to play Aunt March in Katharine Hepburn's *Little Women* (1933), the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* (1933), Aunt Betsey in *David Copperfield* (1935), the nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* (1936), and anything else that was thrown at her.†

Rarely could an effective character actor become the sort of bonus the studios dreamed of: a player who wasn't making a star salary but who could actually work at all three acting levels—star, character type, and support. Two men who managed it, Frank Morgan and Edward Arnold, were exceptionally talented and versatile.

FRANK MORGAN



Frank Morgan

Morgan, who was born in 1890, began his career in movies in the silent era (around 1916), and he was also successful on the Broadway stage. (Today he is best remembered as the bumbling Wizard of Oz, a sort of male Billie Burke who's running a show he doesn't even understand.) Morgan was a freelance player for a time, and he earned an Oscar nomination for his role in *The Affairs of Cellini* in 1934.* But the height of his career was his years as a contract player at MGM from the mid-1930s until his death in 1949. It was at Metro that his type was polished and perfected. He was so good at playing wishy-washy that the majority of his Metro roles cast him that way. He bumbled and stumbled. He stammered and looked confused. He huffed and he puffed. He was brilliant at being a dithering idiot, a skirt chaser, maybe a boozier, but always a *very* confused and unreliable man. He could be had and then some. Audiences loved it. However, MGM realized that in Morgan they had an experienced professional who could, in fact, really act. He could do comedy, and could look white-haired, distinguished, and elegant, even fatherly if he had to. He was a “bonus” player in spades. They developed a shrewd plan for casting him for the maximum return on the money. In the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Frank Morgan releases for the calendar year 1940 can be seen the studio's strategy.



Frank Morgan, typical Hollywood character actor, in two of his most famous roles: (*above*) as the dithering husband who learns his wife is unfaithful, with Margaret Sullavan and James Stewart in *The Shop Around the Corner*

Morgan appeared in seven movies during 1940 and rolled over immediately into 1941 with another five—twelve movies in release in under two years, or a movie about every six to eight weeks. His seven 1940 movies reflect his usefulness: one supporting tragic role, three ditherers, and three leads in vehicles designed specifically for him. His serious film is *The Mortal Storm*, in which he sympathetically and touchingly plays an aging Jewish professor who is persecuted by the Nazis. For an actor associated with silly comedy to take on such a role is not only daring but dangerous, yet MGM knew he could do it. (He's excellent in the movie.) His three typical Morgan "character" roles present him in the way most people think of him—as a blustering fool. He dithers effectively at three levels: high dither for *Broadway Melody of 1940*, in which he's a Broadway producer who always "loans" an ermine coat to his date but who retrieves it at her door if she doesn't invite him in; mid-dither as a befuddled oil wildcatter, rival to Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy and the constant butt of their tricks (*Boom Town*); and low dither as a tenderly hurt shop owner who fears his wife is unfaithful in Lubitsch's superb *Shop Around the Corner*.



and answering the knock at his door by the Tin Man (Jack Haley), the Cowardly Lion (Bert Lahr), Dorothy (Judy Garland), and the Scarecrow (Ray Bolger) in the legendary *Wizard of Oz*. Toto has apparently bunked off somewhere.

In his remaining three films of 1940, Morgan is the star. Each role cleverly unites his familiar bumbler to his dramatic ability to become the hero. In *The Ghost Comes Home*, as *Variety's* review says, "Morgan dominates." It's a light comedy about a Milquetoast husband (Morgan, of course) who is thought to have drowned accidentally. He hides out and observes his family, ultimately getting tough with them while also becoming a town hero. In

Hullabaloo, he carries an entire company of newcomers on his back in a weak film that's a comedy with music. The youngsters are all being "showcased" or "tried out" while he ensures their box office. Playing an experienced actor who's trying to revive his career through radio, he has to imitate Al Jolson, Ted Lewis, Wallace Beery, Robert Taylor, Mickey Rooney, *and* Hedy Lamarr. As if that weren't enough, he also has to reenact a scene from his own *Boom Town*, playing Gable, Tracy, and Colbert. (This type of self-reference is one of the absolute proofs of stardom.) In *Henry Goes to Arizona*, Morgan again steps up to the lead, working out of his familiar character. He's a vaudevillian afraid of guns who inherits a ranch out west when his brother is murdered. He has to overcome his fear—cut the dithering—and become a hero.

This year of Morgan releases shows him working the street, breaking with type, playing type, and using type to become the lead. In 1941, he started out with a movie called *Keeping Company*, the first of a planned series that was going to feature the homey adventures of a small-town family. (Andy Hardy, anyone?) Morgan would be a real estate broker with three daughters—Ann Rutherford, Gloria DeHaven, and Virginia Weidler. It was expected that Morgan would carry the series, provide romantic interest for the older women in the audience, and supply wisdom, charm, and his own adventures with suspected infidelity. The film did not take hold, but it illustrates how MGM viewed Morgan: as a "bonus" character who could play at all three acting levels. The 1941 film that best illustrates what Metro could get out of Frank Morgan is *Washington Melodrama*. He steps out on-screen impeccably tailored and suave-looking as a millionaire philanthropist who's pushing a Senate bill to help Europe's destitute children. While his wife (Fay Holden) and daughter (Ann Rutherford) are in Europe, he forms a platonic friendship with a nightclub girl who's murdered, setting him up for blackmail. Morgan plays rich. He plays well-dressed. He plays faithful and altruistic. He looks good, but not too good. And he dithers.

Perhaps the ultimate in how MGM could put its character actors to work for a maximum bonus is illustrated by *The Great Morgan*:

Frank Morgan plays Frank Morgan playing Frank Morgan. An equivalent to the “clip show” format that TV sitcoms use today, in which old shows are recycled while characters “remember,” *The Great Morgan* similarly uses the MGM lot (to play the role of the MGM lot), studio personnel to play themselves as studio personnel (Cedric Gibbons, Douglas Shearer, and Irene), and clips from films that had been cut before release (Eleanor Powell tapping out a nightclub routine). Making use of old Pete Smith specialty shorts, Tommy Dorsey and His Orchestra, the four King Sisters, Virginia O’Brien, and whatever else is lying around, the movie tells a “story” to hang it all on: Frank Morgan, that is, “Frank Morgan” has been at MGM for sixteen years and now wants to be a producer. He keeps looking over the current roster of MGM films in the works (*Weekend at the Waldorf*, *The Harvey Girls*, *Easy to Wed*, *They Were Expendable*, *Her Highness and the Bellboy*), which acts as a conveniently planted “prevues of coming attractions.” Morgan was a recognizable character actor associated with messy situations. He worked perfectly in this movie, which ends with his head replacing that of Leo the Lion in the MGM logo. (Leo is shown watching, and he says, “Brother, if I could only talk!”) As I’ve said, it was a ruthless business that would do anything to make a buck.

Over the years, Morgan was moved up and down the star ladder without fans either realizing or complaining. After making more than one hundred movies, Morgan died in 1949. As has often been pointed out because it’s too perfect not to mention, he died with his boots on. Literally. He was playing Buffalo Bill—a dithering musical Buffalo Bill—in MGM’s version of *Annie Get Your Gun*, and he had to be replaced by Louis Calhern. The finished movie was released in 1950, as was Morgan’s final film, *Key to the City*, in which he played his familiar role of bumbling sidekick, this time to Clark Gable. Few actors (or actresses) could do what Morgan did.

EDWARD ARNOLD



Edward Arnold

Although both Frank Morgan and Edward Arnold were character actors by Hollywood definition, there was a difference between them in that Morgan maintained, even in his Oscar-nominated performances, a fundamental base that was recognizably “Frank Morgan.” Edward Arnold, on the other hand, was an actor with even more depth and versatility. He had played Shakespeare, worked with Ethel Barrymore onstage (in 1907’s *Dream of a Summer Night*)—and entered movies and Essanay in 1915 as a cowboy star. He returned to the stage in 1919, but by 1932 he moved to Hollywood to become one of the most convincing of all the popular character actors of the medium. Like Morgan, Arnold had a long career that also found him playing successfully at all three levels: star, character, and support. A powerful screen presence, he played the lead in *Diamond Jim* (1935) and *Sutter’s Gold* (1936) as well as in *The Toast of New York* (1937) and *Come and Get It* (1936). His leads wooed the female romantic interest but usually didn’t capture them. (Hollywood knew the audience wasn’t crazy.) He also played detective Nero Wolfe in *Meet Nero Wolfe* (1936) and created his own “blind man” detective in *Eyes in the Night* (1942) and *The Hidden Eye* (1945). When he played “character,” he was the corrupt politician

or the domineering tycoon. His large, not quite corpulent body seemed to represent power in a negative way, and his gravitas was considerable, making him a force to reckon with in the frame. There was a comedy version of this “character”—a roisterer with a twinkle in the eye. His corrupt pol roles included *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Meet John Doe* (1941), and *Weekend at the Waldorf* (1945). His comedy variations were seen in *Easy Living* (1937) and *Design for Scandal* (1941). When he played “in support,” he was a sadly tragic, overweight, and alcoholic but somehow sympathetic husband to Joan Crawford in *Sadie McKee* (1934), a disapproving father who has to learn to be human in *You Can’t Take It with You* (1938), and the head of a talent agency in *The Hucksters* (1947). Arnold’s is a true show business life: Born in 1890, he appeared in more than one hundred movies; used his rich, deep voice with its little lilt to play comedy or tragedy equally well (even appearing in the musical *Annie Get Your Gun*); enriched assignments that were nothing on paper with his ability to add dimension or create sympathy where none should have occurred; showed no fear regarding the most outrageous kind of mugging, eyeball rolling, and double-taking anyone ever put on the screen; and died in 1956. Arnold did it all. He was a bonus on the hoof.



Edward Arnold, a fine actor, was often cast as larger-than-life real people. He's seen here in *Diamond Jim*.

The studio system loved any character actor who could be a bonus moneymaker. These men and women were right on the roster, on the lot, and ready to go. They gave the star machine a day of rest.

* An interesting question might be: Is Porky Pig, a cartoon, a movie “persona”? Of course he is. If Cary Grant is a “person” in the movies, then so is Porky. Grant is an entity who appears only in the movies and doesn't exist in real life. He was drawn up and created by a system that used Archibald Leach as its material. Porky Pig is similarly drawn up—it's just that the raw material was pen and ink, not a guy from Bristol, England.

* Webb was in show business his entire life, first appearing onstage at the age of seven and later teaming up with dancer Bonnie Glass to form a highly successful duo that emulated Vernon and Irene Castle. During the 1920s and 1930s, Webb was a dapper, tuxedoed star

of musical comedies in both London and New York, among them *Sunny*, *Treasure Girl*, and *As Thousands Cheer*.

* The immediate postwar period in American movies found studios rushing to make lots of little movies like *Sitting Pretty*. They are shot in black and white, have very low budgets, use standing small-town sets and houses, and tell stories about “average” young American couples with small children, mortgages, and job woes. The glamorous worlds of Paris, Ruritania, and nightclubs and yachts were replaced by average homes with chintz curtains, kitchens, stay-at-home moms, and dogs.

† Fox kept him working throughout the decade of the 1950s. After appearing in a *Belvedere* sequel in 1949 (*Mr. Belvedere Goes to College*, which paired him with former Fox star Shirley Temple, now grown up), he starred in thirteen successful movies between 1950 and 1960. In 1950, Clifton Webb, against all odds, was listed in the annual Motion Picture list of top box office stars. He was number seven on the list behind (in order) John Wayne, Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Betty Grable, James Stewart, and Abbott and Costello. Following him were Esther Williams, Spencer Tracy, and Randolph Scott. His final film, *Satan Never Sleeps*, in 1962, cast him as an acerbic priest—Waldo Lydecker takes the veil. Webb died in 1966.

* Beery’s nominations were for *The Big House* (1930) and *The Champ* in 1931. He won the latter award, sharing it with Fredric March in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

* Beery’s older half-brother, Noah Beery, was a well-known actor in both stage and film, and Noah’s son, Noah Beery Jr., became equally successful as a top-ranked character actor of the 1930s and 1940s.

† He married silent superstar Gloria Swanson in 1916, before either was famous. The marriage lasted only a month, although they didn’t officially divorce until three years later.

* The only other time a tie has taken place was in 1968, when Barbra Streisand and Katharine Hepburn shared the Oscar for *Funny Girl* and *The Lion in Winter*, respectively.

* Most people agreed, although Mickey Rooney loved him. Beery was famous for stealing props and costumes, taking them home to sell. When anyone complained, Louis B. Mayer said, “Yes, Beery’s a son of a bitch. But he’s *our* son of a bitch.”

* Setting aside all discussions of his politics, Ronald Reagan is generally underrated as a movie actor. He was really handsome as a young man. He had a marvelous voice, a natural style of delivery, and an ease with the camera—all things that helped him, of course, become president of the United States. It is now fashionable to dismiss his film career, but he was far more successful and popular than is generally understood.

† And just in case even this wasn't enough, Metro added the plus of shooting the movie in a lovely sepia tone, a relative novelty at that time for a feature.

* Because of Dressler's death in 1934, she and Beery were co-starred in only two films, *Min and Bill* and *Tugboat Annie*. (Although they both appeared in *Dinner at Eight*, their story lines were entirely separate.) When *Tugboat Annie Sails Again* was made in 1940, Beery did not participate. Marjorie Rambeau played Annie, and her male foil was Alan Hale.

* We don't produce troupers like her anymore. There's no outlet for them. College theatre, yes, or regionals, or perhaps a television series that can lead to stardom, but it's not the same as facing up to new audiences night after night in hamlets and outlets and big-city killer venues.

* Marie Dressler was one of a long line of 1930s female oddities cast with Beery. Although Marjorie Main was specifically groomed as a latter-day Dressler to play opposite him, he also co-starred with other women who were more or less the same type: Marjorie Rambeau and Margaret Wycherly.

* Marjorie Main played the supporting role of Ma Kettle in the 1947 box office hit *The Egg and I*, starring Claudette Colbert and Fred MacMurray. Few will remember that she was actually nominated for an Academy Award as Best Supporting Actress for this portrayal, which originally had warmth and humanity and only later became a stereotype. She and Percy Kilbride, who played Pa Kettle, were so popular with audiences that they were given their own *Ma and Pa Kettle* series. They made nine *Ma and Pa Kettle* films, becoming a 1950s landlubbing version of Beery and Dressler (although Kilbride was a small, skinny man).

* Rooney's eighth marriage (to Jan Chamberlain on July 18, 1978) has endured.

* Linden's story is a Hollywood classic. He spent ten years, beginning in 1931, *almost* becoming a star. Despite a showcase role in RKO's *Are These Our Children* (1931); co-starring roles in movies with James Cagney, Irene Dunne, Lionel Barrymore, and others; and publicists really working hard to sell him, Linden never could make it. When the promised role of Laurie in the 1933 version of *Little Women* was given to Douglass Montgomery, Linden fled California. "I ran away from Hollywood in 1933," he said. "I was twenty-three and felt forty. There was a narrowness in thought of nearly everyone I met. Living in Hollywood was like dropping out of the air onto a strange, undiscovered planet." Nevertheless, Linden tried a second time, returning to sign a term contract with MGM, who featured him as the young lead in *Ah, Wilderness* in 1936. He was paired with Cecilia Parker. Thinking Linden and Parker could become a successful young romantic team, MGM

cast them together again in *A Family Affair*—and then gave up on him (and later, on her). Linden had talent and he had opportunities. He had good luck (replacing Luther Adler in the London stage production of *Golden Boy*) and he had bad luck (having his big scene as a wounded soldier in *Gone with the Wind* left on the cutting-room floor), but in the end he had no luck. He looked too young to play romantic leads and too old to play adolescents. He made his last Hollywood film in 1941. He became an inspector of roads for Orange County, the perfect example of a talent that never found the right role or the right type or the right moment for stardom. He died in 1991.

* The popularity of stories about families had been established on radio with the soap opera *One Man's Family*, and the *Andy Hardy* series inspired imitations, the most successful of which was the popular *Henry Aldrich* series from Paramount. Based on a 1938 Broadway hit, *What a Life!* (by Clifford Goldsmith), the stories about Henry had also been turned into a hit radio series in 1939. The first movie, *What a Life*, in 1939, starred Jackie Cooper as Henry and Betty Field as his girlfriend—and the script was by the famous team of Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett. After Cooper repeated his role in a 1941 follow-up (*Life with Henry*), the role was taken over by the youthful and likable Jimmy Lydon, who appeared in nine Aldrich films within the next four years. The films are all charming, fast-paced, and favorites of most serious movie fans who appreciate the high standards the series maintained with only a limited budget.

* Garland and Rooney also do a number together in *Words and Music* (1948) in which he is playing Lorenz Hart and she appears as herself.

* In 2006, Rooney was featured in one of the top box office hits of the year, *Night at the Museum*. Rooney trumps on.

* This top level of “movie stars” was itself three-layered: those in development, on their way up; those who had arrived and were really what it was all about; and those who were moving downward, getting ready to become what we ruthlessly call has-beens (or turning into supporting players). Sadly, there was also a shadow level: those who were never going to make it to the top. There would be no there in their there. They would be the ghosts in the machine, to be dropped, forgotten, and never thought of again.

† Tino Balio, in his important book *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise* (1930–1939), defines studio rosters in four categories: supporting players, who he says performed the least important parts in movies and were employed for a short time only in order to perform their role and would not receive a screen credit; stock players, a wide range that for Balio includes promising beginners as well as experienced old-timers, who

had six-month contracts (or longer) and could be paid from \$50 to \$350 per week; featured players who did principal roles and received screen and advertising credit with year-to-year contracts and a specified minimum and maximum number of pictures guaranteed; and stars, the elite class.

* However confusing the differences between the character actor-type star and the supporting player may seem to us today, old Hollywood was not confused. The studios had a firm grip on their hiring and billing levels. Today, defining these categories may seem to be splitting hairs, but such information shows how clearly Hollywood's business practices understood audience response to actors. They defined the appeal of any actor in financial terms, stabilized it, and hired the person to deliver what he had that made money. And they were tough about it. However, if an opportunity to violate their rules appeared that might be profitable, they moved fast to exploit it.

* One of my favorites is Charlotte Greenwood. Greenwood appeared only in musicals to perform her patented astonishing dance in which she kicked one leg up alongside her ear, then rolled over on her heels and did the same thing with the other leg and the other ear. Working this routine into the plot had to have been a full-time job for someone.

* B films were defined by having non-star names, low budgets, and running times under seventy minutes. These movies were officially designated "B productions" and carried as such on the factory lists. They were not, as some people erroneously think today, product to be quality evaluated critically as "B." "B" meant low-budget, not bad film.

† According to Leonard Maltin, the series came about because Hersholt had played the Dionne quintuplets' doctor, Allan Dafoe, in three movies with great success. When Dafoe refused to sell further rights to his name, an independent company bought the rights to a popular radio series about Dr. Christian for Hersholt.

* Oliver was Oscar-nominated for her role as the Widow McClennan in *Drums Along the Mohawk* in 1939, but lost to Hattie McDaniel for *Gone with the Wind*. She would have made a perfect Mary Poppins, since she resembled the drawings in the original pre-Disney books.

† Oliver died in 1942 after making her last film, *Lydia*, in which she played—what else—a sharp-witted spinster.

* Morgan was nominated again in 1942, but as Supporting Actor for his role as the pirate in *Tobacco Road*. He lost to Van Heflin for *Johnny Eager*.

RETOOLING FOR WORLD WAR II

If it's true that Hollywood simultaneously reflects our world and shapes it, then here's what the movies can tell us about the era between 1941 and 1946: The men went to war, and the women went crazy. This explains succinctly the sudden shift that took place around 1942, when some people became movie stars for whom there is simply no explanation other than the one that was given for so many things during those years: "Hey! There's a war on!"

Most film historians mark the year 1939 as the peak of studio system production. It was a year that brought audiences *Stagecoach*, *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Dark Victory*, and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, among others. The years 1940 and 1941 kept up the standard: Audiences saw *Rebecca*, *Citizen Kane*, *How Green Was My Valley*, and many other fine films. Everything in the factory was functioning at the top level of both efficiency and creativity.

And then came World War II—a watershed event politically, culturally, socially, and artistically. It brought change, and Hollywood's star machine had to adapt. Like the widget makers who suddenly had to manufacture airplane parts, like the small town where the women had to run the businesses when the men left to fight, like everything and everybody, Hollywood had to retool.* Before the war, things were one way. During the war, another. (And although they didn't realize it yet, after the war Hollywood and the movie business was going to be something else altogether, something entirely different that no one expected.) At first, the war appeared to be a serious setback for star making—a rupture in the process, a loss of direction, a radical change in taste. But it soon

became obvious that wartime was going to be a time of star bonuses, an unexpected bonanza in short-term box office success.

The retooling for war that skewed the star making system has no equal in film history except for the transition to sound that took place from approximately 1926 to 1931. In both cases, new types were needed suddenly, and the business had to move fast. It was during the transition to sound that the studio system star machine organized itself, partly as a response to the new need for “talking stars.” Within little more than a decade, the machine would be put to work again in a factory that now knew how to make rapid changes. After the shock of December 7, 1941, the machine got busy and manufactured a lot of new products. Some, like the plastics and frozen foods invented for GIs, would last. Others were like that dreaded necessity of wartime rationing, Spam. When the war was over, the public was glad to see the last of them. But whether durable stars or temporary stars, the machine made stars. When its country called, the star machine, like Lucky Strike Green, went to war. It retooled and found some big-time stars for the duration: young fellas and girls next door, zanies and exotics, dogs and kids, and one certified all-American box office champion.

THE FELLAS

The first and most pressing need for the machine was to find new male stars. Hollywood immediately set to work to develop other stars to replace the actors who had gone to war. The top priority for what the machine wanted in a man was simple: one who was available. That was going to be older men, star look-alikes, foreigners who had escaped to America, guys who were 4-F, or young and boyish-looking fellas. Some male movie stars had legitimate deferments from combat. John Wayne was thirty-five years old in 1942, and this put him at the ceiling for draftability (the cutoff was age thirty-five). He was also a married man with four underage dependents. Gary Cooper and Fred Astaire were over forty. William Powell was forty-nine, Bogart was forty-two, and

Tracy was forty-one. These men did their part, but they were too old to be drafted into active service. New movies to star those who stayed behind were immediately put into the works. Handsome men with accents—and in a war story an accent was an asset—were groomed: Philip Dorn, Helmut Dantine, Paul Henreid, Jean-Pierre Aumont, and Arturo de Córdova. When Gable enlisted, all the studios created Gable look-alikes: John Hodiak, Lee Bowman, John Carroll, James Craig. But the main fodder of the star machine as World War II hit the studios in the pocketbook was the last group—the young, boy-next-door types. The all-American man was about to become a 4-F kid.

After the boys of World War II, the “leading man” would never be the same. The teen idol was born with the retooling of American manhood into a younger, thinner, more sensitive-looking guy. The effect of World War II on shaping the “new hero” as a “sensitive” male has never been fully explored.* Much credit has been given to the Actors Studio for producing a new kind of male star—the Montgomery Clifts, the James Deans, and the Marlon Brandos. Who remembers that the type was already in place, thanks to World War II having brought us Van Johnson, Marshall Thompson, Dane Clark, Lon McCallister, William Eythe, Robert Walker, Guy Madison, and others?† When the men went to war, the boys took over. The boys needed girls next door to romance, and younger sidekick actors to hang out with and younger parents to have given birth to them, and so on.‡

VAN JOHNSON



Van Johnson

The secret of Van Johnson's success was simple. He looked like a real person. And he looked like a real person at a time when audiences wanted it that way. Movie stars almost never look like real people. Even the least good-looking of them—or the ugliest (Wallace Beery)—never actually look like the rest of us ordinary folks. *They* stand out. Johnson stood out because he looked supra-real. He was tall and freckled, and he was both handsome and goofy looking. He had a rough-hewn quality, with a distinctive voice and a scarred mug. *Life* magazine defined his appeal as that of “the simple-faced boy from next door...out of the classic groove.”

Before the war, the machine didn't know what to do with Van Johnson. Should he play villains, loyal sidekicks, or heroes? Would

he be in musicals, having been a legitimate chorus boy, or would he do comedy or drama? In late 1941, Johnson had signed a six-month contract with Warner Bros., but he just sat around after his arrival at the studio. A starstruck movie fan, at least he enjoyed being in Hollywood. As his contract was about to expire, he was suddenly cast in *Murder in the Big House*, a typical low-budget Warner Bros. movie. By the time shooting began, in January 1942, America had entered World War II, and Johnson's career would drastically change. However, the movie he was making was not only undistinguished (it wasn't supposed to be otherwise), but he was undistinguished in it. Warners inexplicably dyed his hair and eyebrows black. ("They told me blond men weren't star material," Johnson said later.) He played a young reporter and looked awkward. "I simply didn't know how to act in front of a camera," he admitted.

Murder in the Big House is one of the many examples in which Warner Bros., with its tendency to deemphasize stars and emphasize genre and story, bungled it with a young talent. Like Lana Turner before him, Johnson didn't fit in the universe of the Warners genre system. (And like her, he would end up at MGM.) Seeing Johnson in *Murder in the Big House* is unsettling: Somewhere in there is the big goofy guy with freckles, but in the meantime, who is this stiff nerd with the dark hair? Changing Johnson's hair color to black destroyed what he had to give to the camera. It robbed him of what he was, and of what would make him famous: his boy-next-door, natural qualities.

Almost immediately, Warners dropped Johnson's option and didn't renew his contract. By late 1942, he signed at MGM, which had started losing its roster of male stars to the draft. Van Johnson was standing there—all six foot two inches of him (and soon to have a draft-defying steel plate in his head*)—and MGM knew what to do. They focused on his wartime potential and the machine moved in.

First, Johnson was shrewdly larded into small roles in several movies, testing his ability and his audience appeal. He appeared in three 1942 films: *Somewhere I'll Find You*, *The War Against Mrs.*

Hadley, and *Dr. Gillespie's New Assistant*. In *Somewhere I'll Find You*, he was given the true kiss of promised stardom: He was allowed to play a small role in a movie starring Clark Gable and Lana Turner, and he meets the challenge with natural ease. In *Mrs. Hadley*, Fay Bainter, an established character actress with serious credentials, plays a wealthy woman who isn't interested in making sacrifices for the war effort. But her daughter, played by Jean Rogers, falls in love with a buck private (Johnson) and marries him. Johnson looks utterly charming and seems to be just the boy you'd want your daughter to bring home. *Dr. Gillespie* tested him opposite a real scene-stealer, Lionel Barrymore. Johnson once again held his own, impressing everyone as Dr. Randall "Red" Adams. For Johnson, 1942 was a success, and the studio liked what they saw. He was a hard worker who adored his new career and was more than willing to cooperate with studio bosses in any way they required.

Johnson's final trial period was 1943. First, he would appear in *The Human Comedy*, one of Metro's "prestige" films, based on a number-one best seller by William Saroyan; then he would be seen in small parts in two films (*Pilot No. 5* and *Madame Curie*); and follow up by doing a repeat of Dr. Red Adams in *Dr. Gillespie's Criminal Case*. He would close with *A Guy Named Joe*. During 1943 and 1944, Van Johnson would become a hugely popular movie star, and within two years he would be ranked in the top ten box office draws (for the years 1945 and 1946). The efficient star machine had used 1942, 1943, and 1944 to bring Johnson forward to top ten box office status in a classic example of its ability to create a star. Johnson's face would be seen on more movie magazine covers than any other male star's during this period, and almost every movie magazine carried news about him—a story, a photo, an interview, a full-color picture, a review of a movie, an announcement of his next movie. He received more than eight thousand fan letters per week, mostly from girls between the ages of twelve and eighteen. He was Frank Sinatra without the songs. (When the fame first took him over, he was quoted as saying, "I can't pick my nose in public anymore." Later he changed this to "Now I can't even pick it behind four walls.")*

Johnson's 1943 movies illustrate how wartime needs developed his image. *The Human Comedy* is a movie that so perfectly captures the emotions of the day it almost can't work at any other time. It's a sentimental story about a small town, a lazy, sun-dappled, safe American world. Its citizens all know one another, and whatever news there is belongs to everyone immediately. It's the kind of small town that only those of us who grew up in one can really believe, and Van Johnson perfectly fits in it. After all, he was from Providence, Rhode Island, and was pretty much a real-life small-town boy. As the doomed older brother of Mickey Rooney, Johnson has a sort of glow about him. He's full of life and humor, the perfect embodiment of America's sacrificial young soldiers. The sadness of his on-screen death elevates his wholesomeness into emblematic status. It was his next movie, however, a minor film without the co-stars, the literary pedigree, or the sentiment, that revealed something that would become essential to his long-range stardom, something that would put a final zip to his type and help him continue to be popular after the war ended.

Pilot No. 5 showcased MGM's star workhorse Franchot Tone carrying the can while a newcomer, Gene Kelly, was tried out in a nonmusical film. The setting is the Dutch East Indies. Military men have scavenged parts out of wrecked airplanes to assemble *one* workable machine to fly on a dangerous mission to bomb the Japanese. There are five pilots, one plane. Which pilot should be picked for the dangerous job? *Pilot No. 5* has two leading men (Tone on his way down and Kelly on his way up), and three young players being given a moment in the sun to see if the audience bites. (There is actually a fourth. Peter Lawford, looking skinny and fairly callow, has an unbilled role as a British soldier.) The other two actors being "introduced" are Alan Baxter and Dick Simmons. Each has a larger role than Johnson and each gets to narrate his own "flashback" story. Johnson has no such tale to tell, but he's billed over them and is the only one of the three who became a star.

Johnson is the second pilot to be introduced. He's jaunty, cocky, the comedy relief in a grim story. The role is a nice showcase for someone who can register with a minimum of dialogue and screen

time. Johnson plays a sassy hepcat, telling someone to pass the “cackle jelly” (eggs) when they eat breakfast. His character is a smart-ass, wisecracking GI. “I’m fighting because I like it,” he says, revealing the thing that would help Johnson endure: his cynicism. He could project a nasty streak. Yes, he was the gosh darn, aw gee, and shucks hero of World War II, but he was never entirely naïve and he cut a very different image from the sweet boy heroes like Lon McCallister. Prior to *Pilot*, Johnson had established his sweetness, his all-American sense of wholesomeness. But without *Pilot* to fully reveal his nasty streak, Johnson might not have become a big star or survived the 1940s. When the need for apple pie ended, Johnson was still authentic. He could play all huffy and annoyed by “normal” people while being presented as the embodiment of them. He later became an excellent audience surrogate as a carping presence. While everyone else is hopscotching around in the heather in *Brigadoon* (1954), he’s dying to get back to noisy Manhattan, and he steals the show from both Hepburn and Tracy in Frank Capra’s *State of the Union* (1948), playing a cynical news reporter who has all the smart lines.

It was 1944 that turned Van Johnson into pure gold. He played a bit part in *The White Cliffs of Dover*, and once again appeared as Dr. Red Adams in *Three Men in White*. Then he hit the top once and for all with two enormous wartime box office hits, a lighthearted one and a serious one: *Two Girls and a Sailor* followed by *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*.

Johnson had one major competitor for the top spot as young heartthrob during the war years: Robert Walker. (He and Johnson appear together in *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*.) Walker was a fine actor and an original presence. His ability to command the frame and take attention from other actors was deadly. He easily steals *Bataan* (1943), in which he plays an innocent former movie usher who has entered the navy as a musician. Surrounded by Robert Taylor (a Metro leading star), Lloyd Nolan, Thomas Mitchell, and George Murphy (all movie veterans), and colorful youngsters (Desi Arnaz), Walker wipes the floor with them. His World War II appearances include his role as a sensitive young man born in a

military family for whom the army is a frightening chore (*Since You Went Away*), his marvelous role as the innocent army private who woos Judy Garland into marriage in *The Clock* (1945), and his big box office hit as the comic infantry schnook in *See Here, Private Hargrove* (1944). Walker chafed at being typed as the boy next door. During the war, when his career was starting, he essentially accepted the casting, but after the war, he began to fight with MGM. Walker's career compared to Johnson's illustrates one of the keys to lasting stardom: the ability to survive fame. Johnson was willing to embrace stardom and the system that defined him, while Walker fought it, railed against it. Johnson took his blows and kept on going. Walker was beaten down. Compounding his dissatisfaction was his tragic relationship with his wife, Jennifer Jones, who left him for David O. Selznick. Walker's behavior became increasingly neurotic and self-destructive, although his talent never wavered. When Alfred Hitchcock understood his weird and unsettled qualities, he cast him in his greatest role, that of Bruno Anthony in *Strangers on a Train* (1952). Robert Walker's career was short—he died just short of his thirty-third birthday in 1951—and he has never received his due, but *Strangers* gave him immortality. Furthermore, his influence cannot be denied.* His shadow falls over James Dean, Montgomery Clift, and others.

Van Johnson's life as the big box office heartthrob, pinup-boy draw of the 1940s was the biggest type of stardom there is—it's just a briefer version of it. By the end of the 1940s, as his hottest bobby-sox adulation died down, he was starting to see a diminishing of his popularity. However, being at MGM meant he wouldn't instantly be useless after the war, because he could sing, he could dance, and MGM was the studio of great musicals. They would use him in many musicals as the romantic lead, although they didn't gave him many chances to strut his dancing. They already *had* dancers—Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire—and who needs other dancers with those two under contract? Johnson was sold as an ordinary, real-life guy—presumably someone who would *not* suddenly start tapping his way down the street. Given a chance, however, Johnson could hoof it for real. I'll always remember the response of the audience when I first

saw *Till the Clouds Roll By* (1946). Red-haired Lucille Bremer, an Arthur Freed protégée, is dancing around a bandstand. The bandleader has his back to the viewer. Suddenly, Bremer turns him around and pulls him into the spotlight. It's a sheepishly grinning Van Johnson! The audience at first gasped—it's a cameo for him—and then burst into wild applause. Johnson and Bremer perform a spirited rendition of "I Won't Dance," and Johnson demonstrates his ability to sing, *really* dance, and still perform the role of a bashful, all-American guy. Johnson's cute grin, his loosey-goosey high stepping, added to the usual unexpectedness of seeing a really big man turn out to be light on his feet, sent the audience into ecstasy. They cheered their heads off when the number was over.*



Van Johnson found fame and a perfect co-star in MGM's hugely successful World War II musical, *Two Girls and a Sailor*, with June Allyson.



Unlike some of the new guys who came to Hollywood because of the war, Van Johnson had career longevity because he was not limited:

- he could sing and dance, as in *Words And Music*, with Lucille Bremer, and
- he could do dramatic roles as a typical griping American GI (*Battleground*, with the dying Ricardo Montalban).



Johnson's World War II "star" contemporaries (and many of the "leading men" of the war, such as Lee Bowman and John Harvey) began to disappear off the screen and out of the fan mags as the "real men" (Gable, Taylor, Power, Stewart, et al.) came home. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer wasn't sure what might happen with Johnson, but by 1949 it was clear his career would not die. Two key films from that year illustrate why: *In the Good Old Summertime*, a musical, and *Battleground*, a World War II combat film.

In the Good Old Summertime is a musical remake of Ernst Lubitsch's popular 1940 comedy *The Shop Around the Corner*. Johnson is cast in support of Judy Garland. He had always been agreeable and cooperative, and supporting Garland was fine with him, especially since he *was* the leading man. "Support" is the proper word for what he does. He has ample screen time, but all his charm, all his talent, are directed to providing a suitable foil for Garland. He seems calm beside her jitters. He's "being there" for her in his down-to-earth manner, and by seeming to appreciate her, he tempers her insecurity and allows her to blossom as the great performer she is.

When the two stars “meet cute” by bumping into each other on the post office steps, Johnson, playing clumsy with superb physical skills, destroys Garland’s hairdo, her hat, her umbrella, and finally tears the entire back off her dress. His carefully executed physical mistakes, played with calm and apology, work as a low-note accompaniment to her hysterical but amusing responses. Johnson’s dance ability is also at work. The two of them execute their physical comedy as if they’re presenting a musical number in words and action rather than song and dance.*

This proof that Johnson was going to “be there” to support MGM’s musical leading ladies kept his value up at the studio. They had not only Garland for him but also Esther Williams, a big woman who needed a big guy like him to be her romantic opposite.

Johnson’s longevity was guaranteed by his other big success of the year, the big box office hit *Battleground*. After avoiding combat movies as much as they could between 1946 and 1949, Hollywood suddenly started to retell the story for an audience now willing to listen, and learned that the World War II war film as a genre was never going away. Johnson was cast as a smart-talking, smooth-operating scrounger who *gripes* his way through the Battle of Bastogne. His ability to be a charming cynic ensured that his postwar military characters never seemed too patriotic or dated. “Typical” though he was, and associated with the most positive of American values during the war, it was nevertheless Johnson’s slight touch of cynicism—his *Pilot No. 5* self—that carried him perfectly into the postwar years. *Battleground* cemented his image as a typical World War II combatant, and over the years, he would be cast in war movie after war movie. (“I know they’re going to put me in a uniform,” he said later. “I usually ask, ‘How brave do I have to be?’”)*

Van Johnson is the gold standard of the boys of World War II. All the other “boys” who emerged have to be measured by him, since he’s the only one who continued, still working on TV in the 1990s when he was in his seventies. Johnson is not a minor player in Hollywood’s history. He’s a major player for a minor period of time, and a minor player for a major period of time. And it was the

cleverness of the star machine that made it so, adapting as it did to the retooling of the system brought on by World War II. Johnson's career lasted until 1993 in stage, film, and television. He turned out to be the biggest "American boy" developed by the war years and the only one who really lasted.

THE REASONS VAN JOHNSON became a star and remained one past the end of the war can easily be understood by comparing him to Sonny Tufts. Like Johnson, Tufts was a World War II phenomenon—a 4-F guy who was big, good-looking, and available then. Also like Johnson, Tufts seemed real and down-to-earth, the embodiment of his name "Sonny."

Tufts was a rich boy who stumbled into movies. It's unlikely that without the war he could have become a star. But a movie star he was, although even then his name was a bit of a joke. (Years later, he became a trivia coup. If you knew who Sonny Tufts was, you established your bona fides.) For a brief time, he was heavily touted in fan magazines and co-starred opposite Paramount's biggest names: Paulette Goddard, Veronica Lake, Betty Hutton, and Joan Caulfield. Tufts caught the public's attention in the extremely successful war film *So Proudly We Hail* (1943), a strong movie about nurses on Bataan who were serving under extreme combat conditions. He plays a marine who meets up with Goddard on shipboard when the nursing troops are being taken to Manila. Their romance is saucy, sexy, and lots of fun. It was to seduce Sonny Tufts that Goddard's character dons the war's most famous black nightgown to wear as a "formal" for the ship's dance. (Later, she beans him with a rock to get him off the island and to safety by taking him along when she and the other nurses are being evacuated.)

Tufts got tons of fan mail after *So Proudly We Hail* and was quickly put into the star machine by Paramount Pictures, who had him under contract. Paramount cashed in on the Goddard-Tufts chemistry by re-pairing them in the 1944 movie *I Love a Soldier*.

This obscure minor film tapped directly into what was on people's minds during the war, and it was a success. Goddard plays a girl who every night chooses a soldier, sailor, or marine to be her date, someone who is about to ship out for combat. After a happy evening, she accompanies her choice to his departure train. She has her picture taken with each guy in a photo machine, always says she'll be there when he gets back, always gives him a fairly chaste kiss, and when the guy tells her she took his mind off of where he was going, she always says, "Well, that was the idea." There is nothing smarmy or sexual about any of this. It's about loneliness, fear of death, and a pretty girl's sense of what *she* can contribute to the war effort.

Goddard finally meets a soldier she can't give the easy kiss-off—Sonny Tufts. (She can't give him "the GI 'so long'" as the movie puts it.) Tufts is a really big guy, naturally blond, and has a big, goofy kind of grin, not unlike Van Johnson's. His voice is low and pleasant, and he can easily stand around looking awkward, because he *was* awkward. During the war, this passed for naturalism and almost for talent. Although Tufts was never taken seriously, he's not that bad. The movie business knew how to cover his flaws. "You big yap," Goddard says to him, at just about the time the audience is thinking something similar. He's constantly referred to as a "big lug," a "big ape," and other lines designed to say outright that Tufts is no Olivier. He's really *like* the guys who were going overseas—passionate, a bit shy and lost, and wearing his heart on his sleeve. His awkwardness works for the time and for the character he's playing. Because the studio system knew its business, Sonny Tufts could briefly be a star. He wasn't supposed to be polished, skilled, or smooth. He was supposed to be a big yap. That he could do. When the war ended, so did his career.

LON McCALLISTER

On April 17, 2005, a small-town newspaper carried a celebrity birthday column announcing that Lon McCallister was eighty-three

years old. Lon McCallister is eighty-three?* No! Lon McCallister is eighteen and can never be anything else. He is eternally youthful and innocent, the perfect embodiment of the inexperienced boy who's sent to fight in World War II, the one who's never been away from home before. That is his image, and it's etched in the minds of all who saw him back then.



Lon McCallister was the epitome of “typical American boy” but he knew his Shakespeare in a scene with Katharine Cornell for *Stage Door Canteen*. Cornell played Juliet over the apples and sandwiches, and McCallister made a credible Romeo.



Lon McCallister was what Hollywood calls an “overnight sensation.” It served Hollywood’s needs to let the wartime public believe that he wasn’t a professional actor, suggesting that he had something authentic to share with moviegoers: himself. His popularity, which was large, was embedded in the idea that he wasn’t pretending to be an innocent boy—he *was* one. However, as is typical, the behind-the-scenes truth is different. McCallister was Los Angeles-born (in 1923). His grandfather was a night watchman at Universal, and his grandmother a hardworking bit player. He prepared for a movie career by taking lessons in everything: singing, dancing, horseback riding, and acting. He started playing bit parts in 1936 and for nearly six years appeared in what he says was “over one hundred pictures.” He also did radio and was befriended by the powerful director George Cukor. He had enrolled in Chapman College in 1941, but heard about auditions for the role of California in *Stage Door Canteen*, and, by his own admission, simply played himself and got the part. “I always enjoyed being myself on-screen,” he once said. “I never once felt that I was a good actor. There was a

technique and a professionalism that I learned, but I never had a God-given talent for performing.”

Not many people remember Lon McCallister today, but those who do tend to believe that he became a movie star because he was 4-F. Actually, McCallister was drafted into the Signal Corps in December 1943, and reported for duty in February 1944. His studio, 20th Century–Fox, requested that he be transferred to the USAAF’s Santa Monica base so he could appear in the movie version of the wartime patriotic show *Winged Victory* (1944). Following the film, he went on tour with the national company and completed his military service by serving in the Air Transport Command in Alaska, mustering out in 1945.

McCallister was a true wartime phenomenon. His entire star career contains only twelve films. His first big success was in *Stage Door Canteen* (1943), in which he is introduced to the public by having him walk through a chow line in which the woman behind the counter, dishing up his mess, is none other than Katharine Cornell. They exchange a little repartee in which he tells her how much he loved her *Romeo and Juliet*. The two of them then speak the lines from the balcony scene to each other—Cornell, the elegant, polished older woman, and McCallister the naïve young soldier who has just discovered the power of Shakespeare.

This exchange contains real danger for both Cornell and McCallister. She runs the risk of looking old and tired, not to mention the risk of having to play with an untrained kid. He runs an even bigger risk of looking like a fool trying to act alongside one of the greatest actresses of the American stage. But against all odds, it works. McCallister plays Romeo with radiant innocence, excited by the presence of Ms. Cornell, by his own knowledge of the lines, and by the excitement that life—now that he has left home—is opening up to him. The poignant realization that his excitement may lead to death deeply touched audiences at the time. They took McCallister in and wanted more. They froze him in place as the nation’s mascot, our official representative of the teenage soldier in wartime.

McCallister became a teen heartthrob, and his 1944 film *Home in Indiana* was a big hit. It paired him with two beautiful newcomers

that Fox had under contract and wanted to showcase, June Haver (the studio's new threat to Betty Grable) and Jeanne Crain. In a well-written story about horses, racing, and teenage love, McCallister was perfectly cast, and his popularity hit a peak. (The movie was remade in 1957 as *April Love*, a musical version with Pat Boone.) McCallister was charming but a minor talent. When the war ended, there wasn't much to be done with him: He had served his purpose. No one needed him anymore—not Fox, not anyone else in Hollywood, and not the public.

Luckily, McCallister didn't seem to mind. The hoopla of stardom had never suited him. He made his last film, *Combat Squad*, at Columbia in 1953, and then voluntarily walked away from his career. He was twenty-nine years old. (Had he been a bigger star, he could have qualified as a male Deanna Durbin.) In 1982, McCallister told an interviewer, "Twenty years ago my ideas of the rules of the game were extremely limited. From the very beginning of my career, providing I was lucky and saw my name above the title and made a lot of money, it was my ambition to quit at the age of thirty. Well, I did quit when I was twenty-nine." He quit, but he was never really forgotten by the audiences of his era. Still being interviewed, and still being listed in celebrity birthday columns until his death, McCallister reassured everyone about his choice: "I prefer the anonymity of the has-been...and the quiet life of a beachcomber."

A GIRL FOR THE FELLAS



June Allyson

The lovely-looking and naturally beautiful young girls who emerged as new stars during World War II *could* be glamorized—and some later were—but during this period they were kept wholesome and fresh-looking: Donna Reed, Jeanne Crain, Phyllis Thaxter, Teresa Wright, Laraine Day, and many more. During the early forties, they were sold as “the girls who live next door,” but the public wasn’t all

that fooled. Who lived next door to someone who looked like Donna Reed? No, the real girl next door during the wartime years was someone a little less attractive, a little more mousy, a tad imperfect with her gravelly voice: June Allyson. Allyson was the World War II girl for Van Johnson's boy. This relationship was born on-screen in *Two Girls and a Sailor* in 1944, and it carried both of them past the war.

Like McCallister, Allyson was presented to audiences during the war as an overnight sensation. She *was* young and she *was* perky, but she had been working for her living, scratching her way into show business, for a long time, and it had been seven years since she first appeared in a movie. She was both talented and shrewd, having invented a name and life for herself even before the studio did it for her. Her real name was Ella Geisman, and she was born in 1917, which meant she was already twenty-five years old when she made *Two Girls and a Sailor*, her breakthrough movie. Not old, but not an innocent young girl either. She was born in the Bronx. Her father deserted her mother when Allyson was barely six months old, taking her older brother with him, and she saw her sibling only once more. Ella and her mom were very poor. Allyson later admitted, "It's hard to forget those days." Their apartment had no bath, so they heated water on a coal stove and bathed in a washtub. Because her mother had to work, Ella was alone much of the time, and they often moved from neighborhood to neighborhood. While visiting her grandparents, she fell from a tree she was climbing and seriously injured her back, becoming a semi-invalid with a steel brace. Allyson's childhood was hardly the stuff that connected her to the happy all-American icon she became for MGM.

Allyson found escape by going to the movies. She particularly loved Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers musicals, and dreamed of becoming the new Ginger. After being given swimming therapy for her back, she started taking dancing lessons and dreaming of show business success. She changed her name to June Allyson, entered amateur dance contests (none of which she won), and "studied" Rogers by watching her films with Astaire over and over. (She later claimed to have seen one of them eighteen times.) She was intrepid

in promoting herself and actually made her movie debut in 1937 in a Vitaphone short, *Swing for Sale*. She also made four other shorts for Educational: *Pixilated*, *Dime a Dance*, *Dates and Nuts*, and *Sing for Sweetie*. It's always a shock for fans seeing *Swing for Sale* to realize that the platinum-haired young lead is actually the June Allyson they thought they first encountered in the 1940s. She's twenty years old and she's cute but not yet distinctive. Her voice is a bit rough but not quite the unusual raspy sound we now associate with her. She handles herself well and shows an ability to be relaxed on camera. However, platinum hair robs her of any naturalness or originality. She looks just like one hundred other girls of the 1930s—the parade of Harlowettes that were, quite literally, standing on every street corner. It was only after she stopped imitating others that Allyson became a star. As herself. Or, actually, as the “herself” the business invented: the ideal girlfriend and/or the ideal wife.

While making her early musical shorts, Allyson was also trying to make it as a dancer on Broadway. She went into a series of shows: *Sing Out the News*, in which she had three numbers of her own: *Very Warm for May*, appearing only as a chorus girl; and *Higher and Higher*, in which she had a small role and her own program listing. Finally, she found what she was looking for, that accident of casting or timing that changed her life. In 1940, the new Cole Porter show, *Panama Hattie*, starring Ethel Merman, opened, and June not only snagged a job in the chorus but also the understudy role to the second lead, Betty Hutton. Just like in the movies, Hutton came down with the measles and Allyson went on in her place, performing with great success. Producer George Abbott saw her and promised her a good part in his next show, *Best Foot Forward*. In it, Allyson was given three numbers of her own. When the screen rights were bought by MGM, she was hired for the movie and was on her way. When she arrived in Hollywood, she was a performer with five years of experience both on Broadway and in musical shorts.

Allyson knew what she wanted, and she was willing to work hard to get it. MGM quickly spotted her talent, her originality, and, possibly the most important thing of all, her malleability. They put

her directly into the machine, “erasing” her earlier movies and giving her a small specialty number in the Mickey Rooney–Judy Garland hit *Girl Crazy*. The movie opens on Rooney living it up in a nightclub, and Allyson comes onstage and nails a fast and sexy number, “Treat Me Rough.” She’s bold, she’s physical, and she’s comic. *Not* the girl next door.* After a small part in *Thousands Cheer* (1943), she took a featured player role in *Meet the People* in 1944. (The star was Dick Powell, who would later become her husband.) In *Meet the People*, Allyson’s last role as anything but a star, she gets special billing at the end of the featured players—June Allyson as Annie—which singles her out. Thus, the credits make it clear she’s been marked for stardom, and her performance makes it even clearer that she’s itching to have it. In her first scene, she appears outside a train window. She has been placed directly in the center of the frame, in front of bandleader Spike Jones, just behind Bert Lahr, standing next to a featured player, the singer Virginia O’Brien. Allyson has no lines and no action except for a smile. However, she’s in the key light, smiling her head off, standing out like a beacon. When she finally gets her big number—“I Like to Recognize the Tune”—she comes onstage to join the popular band leader Vaughn Monroe and practically eats the number alive. Although others in the cast finally join her, she makes the song hers, and the editing favors her with medium close-ups. She stops the show. Later in life, Allyson said, “I couldn’t dance, and Lord knows I couldn’t sing, but I got by somehow.” The truth is that Allyson *could* sing and dance. Her next movie was the highly profitable *Two Girls and a Sailor* (1944), and, as has been discussed earlier, its success confirmed her stardom.

Allyson’s story illustrates how the star system worked to establish a unique presence. When she was a junior Jean Harlow, she didn’t click. When she was a second-level Betty Hutton, she did all right but would never have become a star. MGM’s makeover process did three key things for Allyson: It changed her hair color, it costumed her distinctively in simple “off the rack” outfits (especially designed, of course), and it deglamorized her makeup. The cumulative effect turned her into a different presence on-screen. By

changing her hair to a “realistic” color, dressing her in little Peter Pan collars and full skirts, and wiping off some pancake, MGM turned her into a girl next door. World War II did the rest by creating a need for her. Giving her a softer personality—fewer madcap Huttonisms—but still retaining her feisty quality, MGM made Allyson into a tomboyish leading lady perfect for the 1940s. And by tapping into her own personal yearning for what she never had—family, a normal life with a father bringing home the bacon—they coaxed out of her a quality that was touching, something the audience could sense and feel that didn’t need to be articulated. MGM located the trembling little girl who lived inside her. Eventually, Allyson’s background of poverty and loss, of pain and illness, was promoted to her public. Everything June Allyson wanted when she was Ella Geisman transmitted itself to her adoring fans. She became a star on behalf of all the little people out there—their show business legend. She was one of *them*, a movie fan, a dreamer.

It’s easy to underestimate June Allyson. She plays low key, without ego. But she connected to her audiences. She didn’t look like anyone else and she didn’t sound like anyone else, but she seemed real. She was a model of wartime naturalness. Fans recognized it, made her a star, and didn’t throw her away at the end of the war, because what she had to give—her innermost true feeling—could fit in any era.

Like Van Johnson, she had staying power. Like Johnson, she had the musical ability that stretched her assets, but MGM seldom chose to use her this way after the war. Instead, they understood three things: her poignant qualities, which could be used in drama; her very strong fan base which, grounded in female moviegoers, wasn’t going to desert her; and her linkage in the minds of the public to Van Johnson.

To carry her out of the war years, MGM shrewdly cast Allyson *with* Johnson in four movies, and they became a successful team. Johnson and Allyson actually made only a total of five movies together, but they are always listed as one of Hollywood’s best romantic pairs. (They had been, in a sense, born as stars together in *Two Girls and a Sailor*, and the public remembered them that way:

the all-American couple.) After the war, they were cast in the dramatic *High Barbaree* (1947), which told a navy flier's story in flashbacks, and two romantic comedies, *The Bride Goes Wild* in 1948 and *Too Young to Kiss* in 1951. The titles say it all, but they carried Allyson (and Johnson) forward, mixing together comedy, romance, and little touches of drama. Their postwar films *combined* their box office appeal, ensuring success. Their final film, *Remains to Be Seen* (1953), was an adaptation of a Howard Lindsay–Russel Crouse play about an apartment house manager and a girl band singer who become involved in a murder.



Allyson became the perfect wife of the 1950s, especially when paired with Jimmy Stewart in *Strategic Air Command*



in the hit biopic *The Glenn Miller Story*.

The other shrewd move MGM made regarding Allyson is one that is seldom commented on: her “perfect wife” phase. June Allyson is to the 1950s what Myrna Loy was to the 1930s—the mate who reflects the values of the decade in moviegoing terms. Loy provided glamour and escape. She was the sophisticated, well-dressed companion, ready to go out on the town, hit the spots, and slug down her own round of martinis. She was a constant challenge to her husband, sasssing him as needed, and always fun for him to be with. Allyson’s wife was the loyal, steadfast homebody, always loving, always supportive, always keeping the home fires burning while wearing a reasonable little outfit. Allyson was fun too, but she adapted to her husband’s wants. If he needed her to catch balls while he practiced pitching (Jimmy Stewart as a baseball player in *The Stratton Story*), hang around the bandstand while he played his gigs (Stewart in *The Glenn Miller Story*), or stand by the window

watching the skies while he tested jets (Alan Ladd in *The McConnell Story*), well, that's what she did. The all-American girl of the 1940s grew into the all-American wife of the 1950s, and Allyson remained a star.*

ZANIES

A good way to think about how off-base the star system became during World War II would be to remember that those years made a pop culture icon (although not a *real* movie star) out of pianist José Iturbi. Iturbi was middle-aged, chunky, Latin, and had a receding hairline. He was a phenomenon of the war, a time in which classical musicians were presented to mass audiences to validate American popular culture. Iturbi was a weapon of democracy. He would play classical music with a reverent, appreciative look on his face, signaling viewers that this was really good stuff. Then suddenly he'd drop the classical and get down, all boogied out, and play "The Dickie Bird Song" or "Route 66" just to prove he was really an okay guy.

Iturbi usually stood aside from the action, just playing himself, since to play himself involved little challenge. Iturbi as Iturbi was always put-upon, the beleaguered famous and talented man whom ordinary people were chasing after, trying to meet, or become involved with, as if he were Clark Gable or maybe Joe DiMaggio. Wherever he went in any movie, people recognized him. ("It's José Iturbi!" cries the milkman.) Iturbi, seldom seeming to understand what is really happening, was a classed-up musical version of Bill Dana's Mexican character Jose Jimenez. However, he *could* play the piano.* Occasionally, he would also be directly involved in solving the problems of star characters. (*Anchors Aweigh*, 1945, was all about the attempts by Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra to meet Iturbi so they can convince him to audition the heroine, Kathryn Grayson.) MGM (who should have known better) even cast him as the romantic leading man for Jeanette MacDonald after the war in the 1948 hit *Three Daring Daughters*. Iturbi still played himself, Iturbi as

Iturbi as lover for MacDonald.[†] (Well, perhaps with his soft brown cow eyes and his perpetually bewildered expression he was kinda cute, at least as cute as Red Skelton.) Iturbi's sudden "star" presence, however, was inexplicable. He was a zany success in a zany era.



José Iturbi, pianist, with two fellow musicians of his era, Mr. Tom (*right*, in tuxedo) and Mr. Jerry (*left*, providing commentary).

During the war, the movie business used the word *zany* a lot. It was supposed to mean “a harmless nuttiness” and serve as an explanation for a lot of things no one could really understand or justify. The musicals and comedies of the war years contain an astonishing amount of crazy behavior, silly, convoluted plots, and bizarro “specialty numbers” that have no connection to the story. Some of these are not only unwatchable today, but downright scary. When Red Skelton howls like a coyote, portrays an advertiser getting increasingly drunk on his product, or turns into a nasty,

naughty little boy, there's nothing benign about it. When Ben Blue twists himself up like a pretzel or Virginia O'Brien sings a number so deadpan you'd swear she was a corpse, or Martha Raye renders her trademark song, "Mr. Paganini," as if it were a bazooka gun—well, you know you are in World War II. War brought stress and change, and the need to release tension through entertainment was enormous. Naturally, to help the war effort, Hollywood was right there at the ticket office with the right kind of star, one with a way-too-jolly madness, a hysterical kind of desperate good cheer.

BETTY HUTTON



Betty Hutton

Looking at Greta Garbo emoting on the screen, swathed in velvet and fur, leaning back on a chaise longue, her lips half parted, her heavily lidded eyes drooping downward, crushing a gigantic bouquet of white roses to her bosom, one of my students solemnly intoned, “Wow! How did she get away with this?” Which leads directly to Betty Hutton. The only possible way to view Betty Hutton today is to say, “Wow! How did she get away with this?”

There is a single answer for both Garbo and Hutton: You had to be there. It’s all about something they had *underneath* that audiences tapped into. Garbo’s image was exotic, sensual, and sufferingly romantic, but her subtext spoke to materialism and hidden desires. During the 1930s, when the Depression drove hungry people into movie theatres for escape or fantasy, she proved that people *could* look amazingly beautiful, *could* lead wealthy lives, *could* survive poverty, *could* have sex, *could* experience erotic fulfillment, and *could*, of course, crush white roses, no matter what they cost. Garbo was about what was really on people’s minds—a need to escape sexual repression, a need for luxury, a need to see the things that would never, no matter what, be a part of their daily lives.

Hutton was the same. She was the high-octane fear and desperation that was inside everyone during the hard days of World War II, the insanity that had to be denied, repressed, lived with, and unleashed only on the dance floor, or, secretly, at the movies when watching her literally swing on a chandelier and bellow out one of her truly nutty song numbers: “Fuddy Duddy Watchmaker” or “My Rocking Horse Ran Away.” The great philosopher-patriot of World War II, Hutton sings the key question of the changing times: “Murder he says? Is this the language of love?” She was perfect for the wartime audience.

Hutton had various nicknames: “Bounding Betty,” “the Blitzkrieg Blonde,” and “the Incendiary Blonde,” all of which fit her particular kind of movie behavior. Bob Hope called her “a vitamin pill with legs.” In her day she was also a weirdly liberated voice of the common woman—the one who was not a glamour queen but who came out of the woodwork to work in the factories and find her way to independence during the war. Hutton was a woman who would

do anything to get attention. In fact, legend says that her singular success was kicked off by a night in which she was so frightened about going on as the lead singer for the Vincent Lopez Orchestra that she got drunk and ran amok while performing and thus found her true calling: running amok.

In her musical numbers, Hutton is like the Andrews Sisters with only one sister. In *Let's Face It* (1943), when she does "Let's Not Talk About Love," a witty and ironic Cole Porter consideration of a "relationship" discussion, she turns it into something that belongs on the psychiatrist's couch. The closest comparison would be with one of Danny Kaye's insane garbled-word renditions of the period, which may have been her model. Hutton sings part of the lyric straight in her lovely husky voice, but speeds up the rest, twisting her body as she twists the words, mugging, turning, screaming it out. Hers is the straitjacket version of Porter's winsome little plea for restraint. (After she finishes, Bob Hope, her co-star, says, "Poor kid, you can see her heart wasn't in it." "Yeah," replies a companion, "but everything else was.")



The reason Betty Hutton was called “a vitamin pill with legs” (among other things) is well illustrated here.



Hutton keeps nothing in reserve. She hops, she leaps, she mugs, and she grimaces. She throws herself on the floor, jumps up and down, and emits war whoops. She twitches and she tics, but you don't have to worry that she's going to fly apart on you the way you fear Judy Garland will. In fact, Hutton might stand as a cheerful version of Garland, one who's nuts all right, but who's not going to let it kill her. Or break *our* hearts. It's as if she's saying, "Okay, kids, it's wartime, so let's all buck up and shake it off!" And it wasn't that she couldn't be touching. When she sings a slow tune, like "Somebody Loves Me" from the movie of the same name, or "I Wish I Didn't Love You So" in *The Perils of Pauline*, she reveals a sad and lonely quality. But she's the over-the-top version of the all-American Girl in World War II, so she's not going to break down. We couldn't use her if she did. At a time when our nation was sending its young men out to be killed, she was the bottom line of American democracy, our last line of movie star defense.

Consider the lyrics of her personal lament, when she tells her psychiatrist in song that she's always "Doin' It the Hard Way" in *Duffy's Tavern* (1945). Jitterbugging and juking around his couch (naturally she can't just lie there), she sings, "Some girls can make any man dream, by flashing an innocent gleam...Me? I have to do a rip up, curl my upper lip up, light a Roman candle, and scream...I have to do it the hard way!" Betty Hutton is many people's guilty pleasure, but some feel the need to explain her or even apologize for her. Why not just say it right out? She's nuts, and I love her. She appeals to the anarchy in me. Yes, it was World War II and I was a child when I first found her. The world was in chaos, and people needed the relief of her insane kind of humor. Yes, yes, yes. And Betty Hutton was willing to kill herself to entertain you if it should prove necessary. In fact, she came close to doing it often, proving that her stardom was the most positively suicidal of any movie personality. Ever. I personally was grateful.

Hutton, like so many other movie stars of the golden era, came from a hardscrabble background. She was born in 1921 in Battle Creek, Michigan. Her mother was an alcoholic, and her father deserted the family when she was only two. (He later committed suicide.) Betty (her real name was Betty Thornburg), her sister Marion (older by one year), and her mother barely managed to survive, living a life of poverty. Her mother, however, could play the piano, and her daughters could both sing. It was their way out. By the time she was sixteen, Betty (her last name changed to Hutton) was singing with Vincent Lopez, and her sister, after a brief stint with Betty as a sister act, moved on to sing with Glenn Miller.*

In 1939, Betty Hutton appeared in four musical shorts, three for Vitaphone and one for Paramount. She was eighteen years old and a confident, brassy presence, especially in *Public Jitterbug #1* in which the Hutton whirlwind is definitely up there on-screen. In one of her Vitaphones (for the *Broadway Brevity* series), titled *One for the Book*, Hutton sings, dances, and performs two numbers: "Old Man Mose Ain't Dead" and "Mr. End Man." She's radiant, and like Old Man Mose, definitely ain't dead. Every time she jitterbugs onto the screen she's a jolt of electricity. She has stardom written all over her except

for one thing—she’s apparently cuckoo. Without World War II to liberate female energy, Hutton would never have become a movie star. A famous recording artist, yes (she really can sing),[†] but a big-time star with her face on magazine covers? Unlikely.

In 1940, Hutton began a successful Broadway career, first appearing in *Two for the Show*, which starred Eve Arden and Alfred Drake. Her second appearance was as the secondary lead in *Panama Hattie*, starring Ethel Merman. Hutton received excellent reviews, and the show was a smash hit, inevitably bringing her to the attention of Hollywood talent scouts. She was signed by Paramount, where she would spend the majority of her movie career. Her “debut” was in 1942’s *The Fleet’s In*, and her role was a plum. She played the best friend of the popular glamour girl Dorothy Lamour, surrounded by a strong cast: William Holden, Cass Daley, Eddie Bracken, and the Jimmy Dorsey Orchestra, featuring Bob Eberle and Helen O’Connell. Hutton was assigned two showstopping numbers: “Arthur Murray Taught Me Dancing in a Hurry” and “Build a Better Mousetrap.”

Assessing Hutton’s abilities, studio bosses at first thought she might be a second lead, the lovable comic sidekick for glamour girls like Lamour. However, watching her sing, dance, play comedy, and more than hold her own, they thought *perhaps* she could do more. Hutton was pretty and had a good figure. Furthermore—and this was key—because she could sing ballads beautifully, she might play romance and be a viable leading lady. They next assigned her to a more or less safe leading role, to test her. She would play a telephone operator at Paramount Studios in *Star Spangled Rhythm* (1942). The movie would have a flimsy plot about how Hutton helps her friend, an old gateman (Victor Moore) who has told his son (Eddie Bracken) that he’s a big shot at the studio. When Bracken, a sailor, gets shore leave, he brings his buddies to Paramount to show off—and Hutton and Moore run around, gathering up real movie stars to entertain the boys. It was surefire for Hutton. She had a lot to do but was safe inside the A list of Paramount studio contract players.

After *Rhythm*'s success, Paramount put her in color, to test that aspect of her appeal: in *Happy Go Lucky* in 1943, co-starring Mary Martin, Eddie Bracken, and Dick Powell. Already realizing that Mary Martin would never be a big moneymaker for them, Paramount gave Hutton showcase footage even though she was technically playing a secondary role. She performed one of her all-time hits, "Murder He Says," as well as "Fuddy Duddy Watchmaker," and climbed right to the top. Hutton became huge, and for eleven years (1942 to 1953) she stayed at the top, with specially designed biographical musicals being created for her.

It was odd that Hutton, the ultimate in unrealistic players, should be asked to play so many real-life women on screen. (She portrayed Blossom Seeley, Pearl White, Texas Guinan, and Annie Oakley.) All these creatures had to be adjusted to Hutton, of course, and were selected because something about them seemed right for her in the first place. Texas Guinan was the famous "queen of the nightclubs," who greeted her customers with a raucous "Hello, suckers!" in the 1920s. She was supposed to have been bold, loud, and brassy—a Betty Hutton want ad if ever there was one. ("Even her funeral's a big sell-out," someone says in the movie.) The movie was called *Incendiary Blonde* (1945), a nickname developed for Hutton, not Guinan. The plot sets Guinan up as a Texan, with Hutton singing "Ragtime Cowboy Joe," strutting down the street in jeans, boots, and Stetson, turning cartwheels, and demonstrating her shooting ability. (This opening scene may be what ultimately got Hutton the most important role she ever played in a musical—that of Annie Oakley in Metro's *Annie Get Your Gun*. She's essentially playing the same part here, and proving she can do it.) The Guinan credo—"Mine's gonna be a short life and a gay one"—works well for a Hutton property. She socks out period numbers like "Oh By Jingo" (wearing pheasant feathers on her rear end, an image Paramount used to sell the movie), and also delivers "It Had to Be You."*

Betty Hutton's greatest role at Paramount, and the one she is best remembered for today, is that of the typical American small-town girl, Trudy Kockenlocker, in Preston Sturges's amazing send-up of American small-town values, 1944's *The Miracle of Morgan's*

Creek. Trudy Kockenlocker is Betty Hutton's Hamlet. Did she do it or did she not do it, that is the question, until the answer presents itself in the form of an unwed pregnancy. That is, a *possibly* unwed pregnancy. Trudy can't remember what happened. Ms. Kockenlocker—and where were the censors?—has gone out jitterbugging with a bunch of soldiers in a whirlwind of champagne, hot numbers, and a bonk on the head with a chandelier. When she turns up at dawn, all she can remember is that she thinks she got married to a guy named something like “Private Ratski-Watski.” Hutton doesn't sing or perform a musical number in this movie. She has only her characterization between her stardom and disaster—the movie skates on thin ice, or at least it did in its day. If Hutton hit a wrong note, her character would be smarmy, unsympathetic, or at the very least, unattractively stupid. But Hutton was born to be a Kockenlocker. She moves in and takes her place as the underground World War II American girl—forget your sweet June Allyson and your noble Ginger Rogers or your low-key Phyllis Thaxter. Hutton puts on-screen the truth, showing an innocent girl in a backwater town stepping out into a world of men and opportunities that are suddenly available to snap her out of her boredom. America is undergoing a transition—it's out of the kitchen sink for the women, over into an entirely different kind of hot water. Hutton, the perfectly schizophrenic movie heroine, was the girl to play *that* kind of character. In fact, if it weren't necessary to worry about political correctness and feminist issues, not to mention all those noisy Focus on the Family prudes, Trudy Kockenlocker could stand as America's permanent and official Miss America. At the very least, she could be Miss World War II. But, no. We need to remember the muscle-bound images of the Rosie the Riveters who valiantly shot bolts for the U.S.A.; and, of course, continue to revere the noble wives personified by Ginger Rogers in *Tender Comrade*. These are appropriate women for the war years, while in truth, it was the teenaged Trudies, out there jivin' and groovin', who were swinging in the winds of change. After the war, the Rosies went home, the wives and moms continued onward in dull grooves, but the Trudies were still with us.



Betty Hutton in her best comedy, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, playing a small-town girl, Trudy Kockenlocker, with William Demarest as her father (*left*) and Eddie Bracken (*right*) as her hapless boyfriend.

Today Hutton is more known for her zaniness than her dreamy and wistful quality, but Paramount hoped to capitalize on her softer side in 1948 when it cast her in the movie version of the Broadway stage play *Dream Girl*, written by Elmer Rice. Paramount bought the rights to the play specifically to introduce a “new” Betty Hutton to the public. She was a big moneymaker for them, but proving that the studio understood her stardom, Paramount worried that since the war was over, her brand of nuttiness might fade. The idea was that she would be presented as an “actress” rather than a crazy personality, and if it were done right, her fans would stay with her. Mitchell Leisen, the director, wanted to film in Technicolor, but

Paramount wasn't prepared to take *that* level of financial risk. In *Dream Girl*, Hutton is a hybrid—her old jumping self and a softer, dreamier self that shows sensitivity and introspection. This worked for no one. Her “Blonde Blitzkrieg” fans were disappointed, and those who wanted serious acting were also let down. The film was a flop, and it was the beginning of the end for her. Hutton genuinely loved *Dream Girl* and believed it was a change of pace for her. When the movie flopped, she was deeply hurt.*

Betty Hutton, Paramount's reliable meal ticket for nearly a decade, began to lose her place, but she had two great successes in the early 1950s: *Annie Get Your Gun* and Cecil B. DeMille's Oscar-winning *The Greatest Show on Earth* (plus an underrated appearance in the small musical *Let's Dance*, which no one ever discusses). The role of Annie Oakley in the highly successful Irving Berlin musical was originated on Broadway by Ethel Merman, but she was considered too old and too unattractive for the movie version. (Besides, she had already failed in her chance at a movie career in the 1930s.) Hutton knew she was perfect for any part that Merman had originated, but the screen rights to *Annie Get Your Gun* were sold to the powerful MGM, largely because it was the studio famous for making high-quality musicals. Metro's resident musical genius leading lady, Judy Garland, was cast in the part.

By then Garland was experiencing severe career trouble. She began filming *Annie*, but her outtakes (in particular the raucous “I'm an Indian Too” number) reveal a tragic situation: Garland is terribly thin, obviously distracted and ill. Her attempts to pump herself up to do the number when the playbacks begin are heartbreaking. When she finally collapsed and had to be replaced, MGM asked Paramount for the loan of Betty Hutton, whose singing style and comic ability seemed right for the role.



Betty Hutton took on Annie Oakley (and the ghost of Ethel Merman) in the MGM version of the famous Broadway musical *Annie Get Your Gun*.

Hutton had been in Hollywood eight years; it was 1950. She came over to MGM from her place as the top star at Paramount on loan to the most prestigious studio in town, and she was, *briefly*, also its queen. (Later, she would say that she was treated badly at MGM and felt unwelcome.) *Annie Get Your Gun* was the musical film of the year, and Hutton was on the cover of *Time* magazine and won *Photoplay* magazine's Best Actress award. Her combination of sassy and rough on the one hand, soft and vulnerable on the other, made

her the perfect Annie Oakley. The movie was a smash hit, and she received outstanding reviews and a great deal of respect.

The Greatest Show on Earth was also a blockbuster, winning the Oscar for Best Film in 1952. Hutton plays a trapeze artist, surrounded by an all-star cast that included Jimmy Stewart, Dorothy Lamour, Cornel Wilde, and newcomer Charlton Heston. In 1950 she also made *Let's Dance*, opposite Fred Astaire. The movie has a bad reputation because in the overall career of its male star, it's not the same quality as the Astaire-Rogers films, or masterpieces like *Band Wagon* or *Funny Face* (1957). The idea of Astaire, with his cool elegance and tasteful charm, paired with the Blonde Blitzkrieg appalls most of his fans. But Astaire was a Nebraska boy with a sense of humor and his own ability to be silly. The two make a solid pair, and Hutton rises to Astaire, understanding that it's a privilege to dance with him. For his part, he reaches out (some might say down) to her comedy level, and the two of them perform a hilarious spoof of westerns in a lively dance number in an underrated entertainment. The combination of two big hits and a movie with Astaire made it seem as if Hutton had survived the stigma of being nothing but a wartime "bonus" success.

However, after quarrels over who would direct her next movie, Hutton got up and walked out on Paramount in July 1952. She turned to stage and nightclub appearances, and also did an original musical for television, *Satins and Spurs*, on NBC in 1954. Later, she would try her own TV show, *The Betty Hutton Show*, but things began to go wrong. Her personal life was a mess, with two divorces and an addiction to amphetamines. During the early 1970s she hit bottom, but was saved by a Catholic priest, Father Peter McGuire of St. Anthony's Church in Rhode Island. In a wonderful one-on-one interview with Robert Osborne on TCM (in 2000), Hutton said about herself and her career, "I used to eat and breathe show business. I was only alive when people were applauding. I died when they closed the curtains...But...I'm not somebody from the past. The Paramount days were all terrific, all marvelous. And they're all gone."*

Hutton's career was jump-started by World War II, but it could have been kept alive longer than it was. When I saw her perform at the 92nd Street Y in the 1980s, she gave it everything she had, which was still plenty. Even people who had never heard of her leapt to their feet when she finished. David Cuthbert of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* wrote that no one "connects with the audience the way Betty Hutton does. The lady remains a great entertainer." Those of us who saw her in her prime couldn't agree more. When I was a child, we all felt that her songs were giving us the safe version of some angst, some horror, that we ourselves couldn't understand but that was running loose in our world. Hutton ran loose for us the safe way. We'll always love her.

ABBOTT AND COSTELLO



Bud Abbott (in choke hold) and Lou Costello (in bowler hat).

The craziness of Hutton wasn't unique on the screen. There were zanies everywhere—in horror films, in strange musicals featuring musical saws and Apache dances, and yuk-yuk imitations of Hitler and Mussolini. There were hee-hawing hillbilly comediennees like Judy Canova and Cass Daley, and there were nerdy leading men like Eddie Bracken. There was always Danny Kaye. And then, of course,

there were Abbott and Costello, the movie comedy team that ranks with Laurel and Hardy and Martin and Lewis for popularity, if not art. Abbott and Costello were beloved figures during the war. Their films were consistently in the top twenty-five moneymakers (and they cost peanuts), and their names were on the top box office draw lists in eight of the years between 1941 and 1951. They were a World War II phenomenon, although they went on for years afterward and also found fame on television. Costello died in 1959, leaving Abbott an alcoholic old man with tax problems and no work. (He died in 1974.) Today they are considered immortal for their famed “Who’s on First?” exchange, an old vaudeville routine now elevated to the status of existential and linguistic purity.

Nothing reveals an era more than its comedy, and when the world went off the tracks in World War II, audiences embraced a comedy team that was more than off the tracks. Abbott and Costello were crazy, and their movies were even crazier. Abbott does nothing. He can’t sing, he can’t dance, and he’s not young enough or good-looking enough to provide any romance. Costello can be funny, although he’s a shameless mugger, and his choking sounds or his “Wooooooh!” trademark are worked to death. Nothing about them made any sense, and nothing about their film plots did either. They were American Dada, and they were what the wartime audiences needed. That says a lot.

I never got Abbott and Costello. Even as a child I was dubious. For one thing, Abbott was really mean to Costello, knocking him around, insulting him, forcing him to do all the work and taking the credit for it himself. There was no insulating silence or charming musical score to distance his cruelty, as there was with Laurel and Hardy. Abbott was just really mean, a scary and dangerous old grown-up, and I begged my parents not to take me to Abbott and Costello movies. (Maybe Abbott would be in the lobby.) Furthermore, Costello was dumb. I wanted to love him and knew I was supposed to, but he was dumb. What if you called a plumber, and Costello showed up, as in *In Society*? He’d wreck the house, destroy the bathroom. What if you needed any kind of a grown-up—a doctor, a housepainter, a photographer—and Costello showed up?

(Adults were never on the alert for things like this.) Abbott and Costello scared me. Were they out there? I prayed not.

For most adults and practically all kids, however, Abbott and Costello seemed fabulous. And to their credit, no two actors in movies ever had less to work with. Universal, their home studio, sold them cheaply, with barely a hint of a script to help them out. The formula? Abbott and Costello were two guys trying to make a living out of something they were no good at, which could be anything. They would run into crooks, gangsters, Nazis, rivals of some kind, and then a bunch of musical numbers would be larded in, featuring popular singers like Marion Hutton, Ginny Simms, the Andrews Sisters, Marilyn Maxwell—all supported by a big band of the era, such as Jimmy Dorsey, Johnny Long, or Will Osborne. This *mélange* would be stirred casually into a plot, and the main events would be two kinds of routines: one of their comedy skits involving verbal play, which were actually vaudeville routines or popular jokes translated into character action, and long physical slapstick routines, usually rear-projected, in which they skied, ice-skated, rode fire trucks or bucking horses, and so on for extended laughs. It wasn't much, but it gave wartime audiences a lot of relief. There was certainly no need to think, barely any need to pay attention.

Abbott and Costello had teamed up in 1931 and become top billed in vaudeville and burlesque. After success on radio (starting in 1938) and in a Broadway revue called *The Streets of Paris*, they came to Hollywood to make their first movie (1940's *One Night in the Tropics*). There was nothing particularly outstanding about *One Night in the Tropics*, but the team did well in their secondary roles in which they did part of their famous "Who's on First?" routine. In fact, they did well enough that Universal felt it could star them in a cheapie-quickie for 1941: *Buck Privates*. It's a riotous, slam-bang kind of movie with one subplot after another, but when the Andrews Sisters swing out with their famous "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy" number, it takes off. Abbott and Costello played two losers who accidentally enlist in the army, and the movie caught the brassy mood—as well as the boogie beat—of its brink-of-war era. It grossed more than \$10 million, and Abbott and Costello were in.

Universal capitalized on the format, starring them in two more “wartime” movies that same year (*In the Navy* and *Keep ‘Em Flying*) as well as in the first of their successful “horror” comedies, *Hold That Ghost*. These four 1941 movies, three of which had military backgrounds, put them on the cutting edge of what was on America’s mind as it moved toward World War II. Although they didn’t make another “military comedy” until the war was over (*Buck Privates Come Home* in 1947), it was the war that made Abbott and Costello stars.

Abbott and Costello projected an aggressive form of comedy. In fact, their comedy universe is a war zone, which is why they were so perfect for World War II. They siphoned off fear into a safe bundle of laughs. They were clumsy about it. (The Three Stooges seem like ballet dancers by comparison; the Stooges knew how to toe-dance their way through a bunch of head-banging, finger-popping, and eye-poking as if Nijinsky had choreographed it.) Abbott and Costello are at their best with their verbal routines, which show an impeccable balance and sense of timing, and which indicate their total understanding of each other’s inner clocks. Sometimes Costello handles these routines on his own, as when he takes on a cop in *In Society*. “I’ll fight you!” he yells. “No! I’ll fight you,” says the cop. “I’ll fight *you*,” Costello rejoins, and “I’ll fight you!” comes back at an increasing crescendo. It’s funny, partly because two grown-ups are yelling at each other like playground kids, but mostly because it becomes an absurdist musical number. Sometimes there are sophisticated comedy lines: Costello dreams about what their future could be after he and Abbott are mistakenly invited to a Long Island house party: “We can be society plumbers!” The duo will stop at nothing to get a laugh and are willing to let the plot grind to a complete halt: Costello walks by a swimming pool, sees a man in a tuxedo, his top hat floating alongside, and he’s screaming “Help! Help! I’m drowning!” Costello jumps in and saves him, and when they get out of the pool, the man (a never-before-seen character) draws himself up and says, “I’m gonna sue you.” Costello asks why, and the man says, “I *had* a hat!”

The coolly sophisticated (yet accessible) opposites to Abbott and Costello were Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, whose pairing in their popular *Road* movies produced one gigantic wartime hit, *The Road to Morocco* (1942). The comedy of Hope and Crosby was War Relief to Abbott and Costello's combat zone. Bing and Bob could act zany if they had to, but everything they put on screen spoke of a laid-back self-confidence, a kind of "We don't have to do this if we don't want to" nonchalance. They were so good they could be arrogant about it. Most people don't realize that between 1930 and 1970, two of the top five box office champions were Bing and Bob. They did more than make *Road* movies. Both separately and together, they were movie stars, recording stars, and later television stars. Their perfection as a movie comedy team was an unexpected bonus for World War II audiences and for their own career longevity. They counterbalance Abbott and Costello, their sophistication a relief from the hard-hitting desperation of the A&C comedy stance. Hope and Crosby moving through the frame are prime examples of movie stars on parade. In World War II, they exude a democratic attitude. "We're not magical beings up here," they seem to be saying. "We're just a couple of schlubs trying to make a living." To strengthen this "we're one of you" attitude, they play jerks, failures. Hope's character is always a coward and trying unsuccessfully to get a woman into bed. Crosby's is lazy, a con artist ruthlessly willing to risk Hope's life but never his own. They are improvisational and easily absorb each other's skills. Hope is a comic, and Crosby is funny. Crosby is a singer, and Hope is musical. Both can really hoof a number. They were a perfect team, two wildly individual talents who could nevertheless subsume their individuality to become a smoothly operating musical comedy duo. They are natural, and they have warmth. It's a strange kind of nasty warmth that comes out of Bob Hope, but it's tempered by being reflected through the easy charm of Crosby.

Although their box office held up after the war, Abbott and Costello were never really as popular as they were during it, when they were *everyone's* favorite comedy duo. (Hope and Crosby, after all, weren't really a comedy duo. They were two top stars who

paired up in some films.) Later, Universal Studios had the inspired understanding that Abbott and Costello were a franchise, and that the studio also owned some others: *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, the *Mummy*. Brilliantly they put the two together, comedy and horror, using established movie names. These films, such as *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* (1948), were highly successful. Today this would be like having the Fockers fall into the Matrix, or go for a vacation on the Starship *Enterprise* or possibly meet the Wedding Crashers. It was a highly original idea that showed real business brains on the part of Universal, and it extended A&C's movie careers beyond their World War II "bonus" years.

EXOTICS

The "make it all go away" of the war years didn't show up only in crazy comedy. There were twisted plots, hysterical performances, dream sequences, and, my personal favorite, leading ladies in turbans, chunky jewelry, and harem pants (or even wearing fruit baskets on their heads).

Lots of harem pictures were made during World War II. Their excesses in color, clothing, and design were appreciated during a time of rationing. These escapist fun fests were in happy contrast to many of the movies that were democratic and realistic. Hollywood could cut loose in a harem picture. It was a great filmmaking bonus: Anything goes!

To go to a harem or pirate movie during World War II was to escape the daily grind. It's very easy to dismiss such films as piffle, but this overlooks an essential fact about movies: the clever way the story could both conceal the troubles of the day and yet explore them in a safer mode. If a harem picture told a story about oppression, or false leaders killing or imprisoning good ones, or people fighting for freedom against huge forces of evil, or about alliances among tribes who were going to wipe out justice—in other words, if the villains seemed useful stand-ins for fascists—then it all worked out in a topical way, too. The hidden agenda of these films

could be what was worrying everyone in the theatre, all masked by turbans and horses and Gypsies and jewelry and high-heeled sandals, and by an exceptionally beautiful leading lady in close-up after close-up. You could see your war won handily by sheiks on fast horses and by a romantic leading man with a charming sidekick. This was the only possible way it could all end: with our side triumphing. You didn't have to grapple with it in realistic terms that might leave you depressed. You didn't have to suffer through *Bataan* or *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*. You could win the war out on the Technicolored desert in a far more fun-filled and reassuring manner.

But such films require a special kind of star to make them work. And no one was going to waste the big names on them. The harem picture by design was really about sex appeal—gals in see-through harem pants and guys without shirts. The business looked for new stars who could be developed as exotics, suitable for the world of escapism the war was demanding for audiences.*

MARIA MONTEZ



Maria Montez

Universal found Maria Montez. She was more than ready for her close-up. During World War II, when the need for colorful escape was deep, she made a series of fantasy spectacles that were hugely successful. Montez had a perfect oval face, dark eyes, smooth, clear skin, and a thick mane of hair. She was tall (five feet seven), full-bosomed, and had astonishing coloring. Originally from the Dominican Republic, she never learned to speak English without a

heavy accent, but no one cared. She was stunningly beautiful and authentically exotic. And she knew how to promote herself, strutting around saying, “I am fabulous,” at a time when women were supposed to be modest. (Since she *was* pretty darned fabulous, she got away with it.) She was a girl who knew how to get her picture in the papers, a master of self-promotion. Without studio initiative, she appeared on her own around town in glamorous strapless gowns, sparkling jewelry, and weird hats with feathers on them, never waiting for the machine to get her out there. She would pose for any stills, do any personal appearance, and answer any silly question for any possible interviewer. She took her stardom seriously, never appearing in public unless she was dressed to the teeth in some showstopping outfit, and she always had something colorful to say. She used herself as the yardstick for everything. “I am so beautiful, I scream with joy.” Of Orson Welles, she commented, “He’s every bit as spectacular as I am.” And she knew how to be provocative: “The public likes you to be spectacular, but after it thinks you’re a star, it wants you to be nice. Now I am nice... and I don’t like it.” Montez was crazy like a fox. She knew there’d be no *Madame Curie* in her filmography, but she also knew silly films could make her a star. She accepted the formulaic plots she was given and made as many of them as quickly as she could. Montez has been called the Queen of the Bs, the Queen of Technicolor, and the Queen of Camp, but never anything less than a queen.



Montez found her best co-star in Jon Hall. Here they are posed on the snake sofa in the glorious, Technicolor nonsense *Cobra Woman*.

The Maria Montez movie formula featured glorious Technicolor, exotic settings, Montez in danger, her most popular co-star, Jon Hall, in danger, glamorous harem-type costumes adapted for modern tastes, comedy relief, plenty of fighting, and a short running time. (Why give anyone time to think about it?) Montez is always

introduced to the audience through a star entrance. She might be sitting in front of a mirror (two Montezes!) or she might be leaning back against silken cushions as she's carried along through the desert. But the first shot of Montez was always a money shot—a medium close-up that lingered, allowing the audience to enjoy her beauty and her turban and her jewels. Jon Hall was her equal in pulchritude and in talent level. He was tanned and handsome, with a beautiful grin, and enough athletic ability to portray the action side of her movies. Another staple of the Montez filmed universe was Sabu, the famed “elephant boy” from India, another example of the World War II exotic personality who briefly climbed to the top. The comedy relief roles in a Montez film included such characters as the heavysset Billy Gilbert or Shemp Howard of the Three Stooges, who plays a character named Sinbad in *Arabian Nights* (1942). (Sinbad's friend, played by John Qualen, was named Aladdin. He complains that he has lost his magic lamp. “You've told that story so often, you believe it yourself,” snaps Sinbad.) Such comedy moments illustrate one of the fundamentals of the Montez movies: They were contemporary. Even though they were allegedly set in the Arabian nights, unreal desert places, strange islands with volcanoes, or Gypsy camps, their historical time frame was *right now*, “now” with bizarre costumes. No one cared anyway.

Almost no one was more fun to watch than Maria Montez. She was so willing to be passionately sincere about nonsense. In her first starring role (*Arabian Nights* [1942]), she sets that tradition, dancing the dance of one veil as if her life depended on it, which, in the plot, it did. It's more kitchie-koo than choreography, but she just gets out there and goes for it. As the evil Naja in *Cobra Woman* (1944), she struts down to her old swimming hole in turban and high heels while drums pound and music swells. She tools along, obviously enjoying herself, her dangling earrings swinging, and a dozen handmaidens and six armed guards on patrol to tend her. Today every teenager around town can strut her stuff, but in Montez's day, for a woman to swing out with that kind of ruthless self-confidence, that sense of her own power, was pretty amazing. Audiences respected her for it. If you're going to play a cobra priestess who

warns people, “Fire mountain grows more angry. I need more gold!” you’d *better* be amazing. One review of her performance went right to the point: “Zowie!”*

Montez is seldom helpless. She’s a female action figure way before her time. When she plays twins in *Cobra Woman*, a nice one and a mean one, even the nice one demands, “Geef me dat cobra jool!” from her evil other, and pushes her out the window to get it. In *Sudan* (1945) she rides her horse to victory, beating out her male lover (Turhan Bey), and in *Arabian Nights* she tells us, “I do not desire love. I desire power.” (She is, of course, also asked to wear bare-midriff dresses and execute “harem” dancing. She always looks beautiful, however, even when it appears that her fashion designer might have been Carmen Miranda on an off day.) The bottom line of Montez is a brief but very real stardom. As a character says in *Arabian Nights*, looking at her, “She is a young moon, mounting the stairway to the stars.” Mounting it by stomping right on up!

Even when Montez stepped out of her harem pants and into the *real* 1940s (and black and white) as in *Tangier* (1946), things didn’t change much. *Tangier* is a spy melodrama about Nazis and stolen art, but Maria Montez is still Maria Montez, there’s still a North African desert setting, still an exotic wardrobe for her with turbans and feathers on her head, and there’s still Sabu, although this time he sings, a pretty great shock. (Hall has been replaced by a doppelgänger, Robert Paige.)

It’s one thing to become a popular movie star when you get to play Queen Elizabeth or Madame Curie. When you have to clomp around in wedgies and harem pants, saying, “Scheherazade fears no man,” your challenge is quite a bit bigger. Montez knew how to act as if her lines were Shakespeare, or perhaps as if the outcome of World War II depended on them. She was not ashamed to be a harem queen. She embraced it. There are only two ways to do the kinds of roles she was given—by winking at the audience with a sly sense of ironic humor or with supreme conviction. Montez played with conviction. It’s the more dangerous way to go, but it was her way.

The Montez films were not technically Bs. Her movies were beautifully produced and are excellent examples of skilled filmmaking. In particular, the sets for *Arabian Nights* are imaginatively designed; the overall art direction is first-rate. The musical scores are stirring, and the story pacing is energetic. The Montez movies—especially the six in which she was paired with Hall—were highly entertaining, and legions of fans still care for them today.

CARMEN MIRANDA



Carmen Miranda

Montez wasn't the only exotic and inexplicable type in World War II, of course. Besides Sabu and Acquanetta, there was the

unstoppable Carmen Miranda, with her banana hats, four-foot wedgies, and chicka-chicka-boom musical numbers. Miranda—all five feet two inches of her—is peerless, and she survived World War II, though only just. She wasn't really a leading lady, of course, but more of a musical comedy supporting player. Thus, she wasn't a real movie star, but someone who did star turns in movies.

Most people think of Miranda in her famous “The Lady in the Tutti Frutti Hat” number from *The Gang's All Here* (1943), and who, having seen it, could ever forget it? This number is enhanced by phallic bananas, giant strawberries, bizarre choreography from Busby Berkeley, and showstopping lyrics. “When I feel gay / I dress zat way / Is something wrong wiz zat? No! I'm the lady in the tutti-frutti hat!” Miranda always stopped traffic with the odd clothes she wore. It was one thing to dress strangely when she was doing a number with her Banda da Lua. If she wore cherries in her hair, pinwheels on her hat, shocking shades of fuchsia and bright aqua—well, she was singing and dancing in her wedgies. But when she took on a character role, as in *The Gang's All Here* (1943) or *Springtime in the Rockies* (1942), her “daytime” outfits puzzled everyone, and not just those of us who were children. Her gigantic purses, her hats with fringe and draped fabric under her chin, her jewelry that could have been fired out of a cannon—well, she was weird.* She took America out of the ordinary. But she, too, reflects the tenor of the times: “Take us away, far away, into a world of color and unrealistic stories.” She was an exaggeration and a welcome one.

Montez and Miranda were important escape fantasies of World War II. Both were strong Latin representatives during the years of our Good Neighbor Policy. Montez admitted she had limited talent, getting by on her very genuine beauty, but Miranda was a certified first-rate musical performer, and a sensation in her home country of Brazil as well as in Hollywood. Neither's fame lasted very long. Sadly, both women died young. (Montez had a heart attack in a saline reducing bath in 1951 at the age of thirty-one, and Miranda also died of a heart attack at the age of forty-six in 1955.) But while they were on top, and while the world needed them, they were

sensational, stars of the moment in an era that needed their humor, their color, and their considerable pizzazz. When time passes them by, exotics are always doomed to seem passé, but who dares to put Maria Montez and Carmen Miranda in the bottom drawer? And who would want to? They remind us that people can have fun during dark times. They sent up things with a deadly seriousness that is only to be admired.

DOGS AND KIDS

While working overtime to manufacture new stars for the war effort, Hollywood also found time to return to two box office bonus staples they could always count on not to be drafted: dogs and kids. There was a new run of animal films: horse stories like *My Friend Flicka* (1943), *Black Beauty* (1946), *National Velvet* (1944), *Home in Indiana* (1944), *Smoky* (1946), and a new big-time dog star, Lassie. During the war, MGM released *Lassie Come Home* (1943) and *Courage of Lassie* (1946), and began a run of Lassie movies that would ultimately translate into a popular weekly TV show. Child stars like Natalie Wood, Connie Marshall, Butch Jenkins, and others emerged, as well as young Elizabeth Taylor, who, contrary to popular opinion, was never really what you could call a child star. Despite small roles in such movies as *Jane Eyre* (1944, unbilled), *The White Cliffs of Dover*, and *Courage of Lassie*, she was never a *star* until she played the leading role in *National Velvet*. She was twelve years old at the time. Within less than four years—only four roles later—she was a teenage femme fatale in *A Date with Judy* (1948) and at the age of seventeen was tearing herself out of the arms of Robert Taylor in *Conspirator* (1949), throatily observing, “I’m trying to decide if I love you or if I’m just obsessed by you.” Elizabeth Taylor *entered* movies as a child, found a great role in *Velvet*, but became a gigantic name because of her mature beauty and luscious body when she was still a teenager. Authentic child stars begin as tots, milk the ten years or so they have, and usually disappear after they hit their

teens. Taylor reversed the process, and milked four decades of stardom out of us after she became an adult.

MARGARET O'BRIEN



Margaret O'brien

One *great* child star emerged in the wartime years: Margaret O'Brien, the only sound-era brat to ever really rival Shirley Temple.* Temple had many imitators in her day, and, of course, there had been great child stars before her, but O'Brien was the only other little girl who seriously challenged Temple's throne. She came along

just as Temple herself had gotten too old for her roles, but, because of the war, the public wanted a child to worry over. Shirley was a cheerful little optimist for the dark days of the Depression. She made musicals. She teared up but trucked on. O'Brien had breakdowns and real hysteria. She represents all the sadness and loss of the wartime, our determined little survivor no matter what happens. They are two different little girl stars for two different decades. O'Brien was developed to be the anti-Temple, but Temple remains America's greatest child star and will undoubtedly retain that title unless the world undergoes an amazing cultural shift. The time of the innocent plots and attitudes toward children that made Temple's films possible is long gone. In 1942, when Temple was fourteen years old (the public still thought she was only thirteen) and was entering the difficult teen years, Louis B. Mayer (still chafing over not having his own little girl star) released a movie called *Journey for Margaret* (1942). It starred Robert Young and Laraine Day, and "introduced" Margaret O'Brien as a little waif orphaned in the London blitz,[†] and who wears an empty incendiary bomb casing around her neck. O'Brien was not a musical performer, and she was not a pretty little creature with ruffled dresses and piles of curls. She had braids and a serious demeanor, with a little touch of sadness (or even oddness) in her countenance. She's unquestionably a movie star during this period—not *just* a child star, a *movie* star. She's intense, a little actress, not a child personality. *Life* magazine's Noel Busch describes her as "woebegone...a master of facial hydraulics" and describes her image as "the kindergarten version of the Bacall look, a modified Garbo brood, and a Bette Davis wariness." Unlike Shirley Temple, who was an adorable little girl, O'Brien is an adorable little adult. Her films contain real sadness and trouble, not just a temporary problem to be gotten over. (Shirley's nanny can be run over and killed and she's left on her own in the streets and it's always just heigh-ho, let's have a tap number.) Serious stories fit O'Brien, because serious stories fit the times. She matched her era. There's something deeply sad, slightly off-base, about her. She's on the edge. This, too, separates her from Temple.



Proving her chops, little Miss O'Brien not only broke down and cried in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, but also stepped out in a highly respectable cakewalk with none other than Judy Garland, who played her sister.

The success of *Journey for Margaret* led Metro to put O'Brien into another film set in England, with Robert Young again as her co-star. *The Canterville Ghost* (1944) was based on an Oscar Wilde story, and it mixes comedy, light drama, and patriotism in equal parts. O'Brien plays Lady Jessica de Canterville and the studio made the assumption that casting her as a lady automatically would charm the dickens out of the audience. She's surrounded by a strong cast of character actors, including Una O'Connor, Robert Young, Rags Ragland, Reginald Owen, William Gargan, and a young Peter Lawford, beginning his star grooming. Cast in the plum role of the ghost is none other than Charles Laughton, the old ham born to put

child stars in their place,* but O'Brien is given the star treatment. She's backlit like a glamour girl, with subtle shadows molded over her little cheekbones. Her eyes are made up to be emphasized, and she wears impeccable clothes, including a perfectly tailored riding habit and a Scotch kilt ensemble. As the owner of the Canterville haunted castle, she serves tea to the American soldiers billeted there, and the tea set is bigger than she is. Everything is designed especially to remind audiences, Hey, she's a kid!

In *Canterville*, O'Brien takes the floor to jitterbug with a soldier (in her role as hostess), and her musical participation is the exact opposite of Temple's. Temple was a professional, and she knew how to put over a number. O'Brien takes the floor embracing the idea of herself as polite amateur. She follows the dance as best she can, maintaining a certain dignity in her white organdy dress, two large hair ribbons, and little white shoes and socks. She very carefully watches everything the soldier does, and suddenly gets it, swinging out into a wild twist. For the rest of the dance, she's always just a half a beat behind, studying carefully, maintaining dignity, but participating with controlled grace. This little dance is fabulous and shows why audiences loved her.

O'Brien's ability as a tragedian was effectively used by MGM. In her very best movie, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, director Vincente Minnelli exploited her emotional intensity in two musical sequences with the great Judy Garland. No one upstaged Garland, but when the two of them, playing sisters, present an "impromptu" performance at a party, O'Brien doesn't lose her share of the scene. Singing and dancing to "Under the Bamboo Tree," she is charmingly amateur, yet startlingly professional. Later, when Garland sings to her the melancholy "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," the two actresses are in perfect sync. It's one of Hollywood's most memorable moments. O'Brien sniffles and looks forlorn,* and Judy Garland sings with trembling sincerity. In considering how most child stars would have either been unable to hold the screen against Garland singing *that* song (or any song) or would have ruined it by cheap child star tricks, one has to respect little Margaret O'Brien. Her sincere emotions blend with Garland's song: She supports its

performance, reflects its feeling, bends to Garland's needs, yet is ready for her own hysteria when her turn comes and she runs outside to "kill" her snow people. O'Brien was no ordinary child actor. She seemed real, the hallmark of the wartime star, and she gave her pain and her tears to the audience, releasing the pain and tears the audience had to give back. The war audience needed a crazy emotional kid, and Margaret O'Brien was there when they needed her.

O'Brien continued to act as she matured, playing the occasional role in a movie (*Heller in Pink Tights*, 1960) and on television (*Hotel; Murder*, *She Wrote*). She married and divorced twice, became a mother, and today lives quietly in California. She has become an expert on pre-Columbian art and sometimes appears in documentaries to discuss Hollywood's history and her own career as a child star, a phenomenon she seems to have in clear perspective.

THE ERA'S EMBLEM: BETTY GRABLE



Betty Grable

World War II was the high point of the Hollywood studio star system. Old stars—Hepburn, Tracy, Bogart, Crawford, Davis, Stanwyck, Powell, Boyer, Loy, Grant, Cagney, Dunne—became even greater. Stars developed exclusively because of and during the war found a chance, but only a few lasted past it and most didn't. Of all of these, one star stands apart. She is the official icon of World War II, a nicely rounded little girl in a white bathing suit, standing with her back to the camera but peeking saucily over her shoulder, her hair upswept into a pile of fake blond curls that were a popular “do” of the day. She's Betty Grable, the GI favorite, the Queen of the Pinup Girls.

Grable wasn't the only movie star to have a pinup photo, of course. All the major female stars posed for these cheesecake shots if they were young and pulchritudinous. But it was Grable's photo that became the emblem of World War II. This photo was very popular with GIs and because her home studio (20th Century-Fox) wanted it to be even more popular, the star machine made a clever move and cast Grable in a quickie musical called *Pin Up Girl* (1944). This cemented her status as *the* girl of World War II. The closest rival to Grable's pinup was the stunning shot of Rita Hayworth sitting on a bed in a silk nightgown. (Hayworth was a major star of World War II and beyond, but never in the top ten box office rankings. She was also an iconographic figure, and her films have more depth and range than Grable's.) There's a tendency to dismiss the female stars of the war—the Dorothy Lamours, Veronica Lakes, Hedy Lamarrs—and to say they were limited, yet Lamour was a perfect foil for Hope and Crosby. Lake was unique in looks, a perfect leading lady for Alan Ladd, and terrific in Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). Lamarr was one of the most beautiful women to appear on the screen, and as we've now learned, a mad scientist who invented a device that could have helped us win the war! (You never know, do you?)*

Grable is more than a short-term pinup girl, however. Her stardom was linked to an accident of history. As was mentioned earlier, it was an appendix, not the Axis, that catapulted her into the top ranks. In 1940, when Alice Faye, the delightful leading lady of 1930s 20th Century-Fox musicals, was stricken, the studio couldn't hold up shooting *Down Argentine Way*. They quickly found a replacement, a girl who had been around Hollywood since she was an underage kid in the early '30s† but never quite made the grade. She had appeared in the chorus in Goldwyn movies, played bits in Astaire-Rogers musicals for RKO, and become a second-string star at Paramount in a series of college musicals. She'd been in a Bob Hope movie (*Give Me a Sailor* [1938]) and a Jack Benny vehicle (*Man About Town* [1939]), but she wasn't able to get her foot up on the top rung. She could sing, dance, twirl a baton, roller-skate, and play

the saxophone. She was cute, sparkly, and loaded with sex appeal. But as was true for many young girls who had all that, or even more, it didn't happen. Despairing, and pushed by her mother, she accepted a showcase role on Broadway in *Du Barry Was a Lady*, and her sassy rendition of "Did Yah Evah?" with co-star Bert Lahr landed her on the cover of *Life* magazine. Suddenly everything was different for Betty Grable, and when Fox went looking, there she was.



Betty Grable posed for more pinups than any other movie star in the 1940s. Every film she made had something to show her off:

- a bathtub vocal number, the hit song "My Heart Tells Me," from *Sweet Rosie O'Grady*;
- her little kitty-kat ensemble from *Mother Wore Tights*;
- and her Gibson Girl shortie from *Coney Island*.





But the definitive Betty Grable pinup picture, and the definitive World War II pinup, is this iconographic image of Grable, her hair upswept, peeping back over her shoulder at the United States of America.

Down Argentine Way was a big hit, and Fox was happy to have a new blonde on its roster. In fact, the studio felt Faye's appendix had done them a favor. Two movie star blondes meant twice as much money at the box office, and besides, Alice Faye had been making noises about wanting to quit the movies. If she left after her contract expired, Fox would still have one popular blonde left. Grable had a very strong presence in the frame. She was self-confident, standing firmly on her two shapely legs. (Fox had them insured by Lloyd's of London for \$1 million.)

There was one factor other than Alice Faye's appendix that elevated Grable to star status: Technicolor. When those vibrant colors were added to escapist musicals, particularly by 20th Century-Fox, Grable moved up. She was fabulous in color. A strawberry cream puff. Her blond hair, her creamy complexion, her full and sexy mouth made up in vibrant reds, and the red-white-and-blue outfits she wore—not to mention the lime green, the hot pink, the shocking aqua, the cherry red, and the royal purple—knocked audiences out. Grable had real energy on the screen, and in Technicolor, the energy was electrified.

After *Down Argentine Way* in 1940, Grable quickly scored in *Tin Pan Alley* (also 1940) and *Moon Over Miami*, *A Yank in the Raf*, and *I Wake Up Screaming* (all in 1941). She was a star before the war started for America. That was why she was asked to pose for a pinup picture, and why GIs wanted her on their walls and in their foxholes. Her early movies of 1942, *Song of the Islands*, *Footlight Serenade*, and *Springtime in the Rockies*, pushed her over the top, and by 1943 she was the highest-paid female star in the business. When she married the popular bandleader and trumpeter extraordinaire Harry James, she passed into the realm of movie star legends. To say Grable became a star only because of World War II and her pinup pose is wrong. She was a star prewar, during the war, and after the war. She was ranked in the top ten of box office draws in 1942, 1943, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950, and 1951—ten straight years, unbroken.* Her stardom came from her talent and personality and the help the star machine gave her. It was her *legend*, her iconic image, that came from World War II.

Grable never had any fancy ideas about her own abilities. She said, “I can sing a little, dance a little, and act a little...I was just lucky, I guess.” It was this very modesty, this down-to-earth attitude that endeared her to audiences. They felt it on-screen. And it was this sense of democracy—“I’m just another blonde hoofing away”—that endeared her to everyone during the war. Grable was healthy and hearty; she projected nothing even remotely neurotic. She had a pouty, sexy mouth and a dynamite body, and yet she looked an audience right in the eye like a good girl would even as she wiggled her little behind, shook herself all over, and invited whatever was on their minds to come right on out. She was a girl next door *and* a sexpot.

The characters she played were feisty and independent, which differentiated her from Alice Faye, who was a great singer and often played women badly used by men (so she could warble a heartfelt tune about it). Grable was more dancer than singer, so Fox cast her as a tougher, sassier female. This suited her, and no man pushed her around. Although this type had been determined for her before the war, it was developed even more strongly *during* the war since it was perfect for those times. Being a musical sex symbol would have drawn a large male audience to her, but being a feisty female also drew the women. In fact, her stardom was firmly grounded in the fact that she could be all things to all people. She was a girl you could take home to Mother—and hope Dad would keep his hands to himself. Her fans were men *and* women, old and young, as well as children.

During the war, Betty Grable was like Brooklyn—shorthand for “all things American.” A popular song was “I Want a Girl Just Like the Girl That Married Harry James.” Her photo was used to teach navigators how to identify target areas (they sectioned her off and referred to parts). Her pinup or name appeared in movies with GIs whether the film was made by Fox or not. Her face appeared on more movie magazine covers than any other female movie star. Her films all made money. Betty Grable *was* America in World War II. She was honest, warm, modest, reliable, and tough. Whatever came

her way, she was going to *win*. She was the perfect icon for the times.*

* America's participation in World War II (1941–1945) was actually good for Hollywood. Movie attendance rose higher than ever before because everyone needed entertainment and escape. In 1943 and 1944, 84 million people went to the movies every week. (It was down to 30 million by 2002.) Hollywood produced 538 features in 1943 alone, importing another 240 for a total release to the public of 778 feature films. Despite hardships—no new materials for building sets, shortages and rationing, festering labor problems, specific ceilings set by government on the amount of money that could be spent on any kind of purchase—Hollywood thrived. As they had done when threatened by censorship, a Hollywood faced with government regulations and “guidelines” about what was appropriate for audiences during the war cooperated (and quickly co-opted any interference). The movie business stood up for America. When called on to make a major contribution to the war effort, it met the challenge. The movies made during World War II have been analyzed for everything from the role of women to political subversion to wartime propaganda to governmental interference to modes of escapism and surrealism, theories of reception, noirish reflections of a disintegrating society—the works. Curiously, no one has talked much about what World War II did to the efficiently functioning star machine.

* We've still got him. He's basically taken over: Johnny Depp, Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt (who has since transferred himself into the “man” category by muscling up and buzzcutting his hair), Orlando Bloom. Once the “boy star” emerged, he *would not go away*.

† The “teen idol” had prototypes in the 1930s, with Mickey Rooney as Andy Hardy. Actors Douglass Montgomery and Phillips Holmes also pioneered as “sensitive” types in the 1930s. However, these actors really are only prototypes and were not as influential as those who emerged in World War II.

‡ Boys (and girls) next door—and all the World War II exotic types—had all been seen before, of course they had. But they took on a new and increased importance during the war. The significant issue for stardom is that Hollywood ramped up its recruitment of those types for the star machine, looking for new actors and actresses to develop.

* Johnson's career was nearly destroyed before it began. In 1943, he was cast with Spencer Tracy and Irene Dunne in *A Guy Named Joe* (1943), a breakthrough movie for him. Two weeks into filming, he was in an automobile accident in which he emerged with a fractured skull and severe facial and head injuries. He nearly died, and everyone assumed his scars

would destroy any possible movie career. MGM considered replacing him with John Hodiak, but Tracy stood up and said if Johnson were dropped, neither he nor Dunne would continue. Dunne agreed, and since Johnson didn't appear in the first half of the movie, the three months he needed to be patched together were enough. In the end, his forehead was deeply scarred, requiring special makeup to cover it. A metal plate was inserted in his head, effectively ensuring that he couldn't be called into the military. Esther Williams said Johnson tapped his head and told her, "I've got service for twelve in here. And it's sterling, not silver plate. Only the best for MGM."

* Just how big a star Johnson really was to moviegoers then was confirmed by Woody Allen in 2005. Introducing his latest movie, *Match Point*, at a screening at the Tribeca Grand Hotel, Allen was asked what his biggest thrill as a director was. "That's easy," he replied. "Directing Van Johnson back in 1985 [in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*]! I couldn't believe it! Here I was, *me*, directing Van Johnson!" *Life* magazine (November 5, 1945) called Johnson "the most adored male in the U.S. today."

* Walker was brilliant in twisted form, as in his last film, *My Son John* (1952), an underrated movie in which he's a communist spy. Walker's death has never been fully understood, being explained as of "natural causes after...a dose of sodium amytal." Walker's psychiatrist described him as the victim of schizophrenia of an undiagnosed nature.

* Johnson had a similar showstopping number, dancing with Gene Kelly, in *Brigadoon* in 1954. "I'll Go Home with Bonnie Jean" shows his ability to light-foot it around the screen, and he more than keeps up with Kelly. And he takes to the dance floor to cut a mean Charleston while the Firehouse Five Plus Two beat out a Dixieland number in *Grounds for Marriage* (1950), a piece of junk in which he plays an ear-nose-and-throat doctor whose opera-singing wife is trying to remarry him. But though Johnson made quite a few musical films, his dancing ability wasn't used as much as it could have been. Van Johnson was supposed to be a guy with his feet on the ground.

* Johnson is playing a role originally created by James Stewart. Although they look nothing alike, they have much in common. Stewart was the prewar image of the all-American boyish charmer, but Johnson had hoisted that burden during the conflict itself. They match up to different decades, but they were a variation on the same theme: Here's a guy who might live down the street from you—the Indiana, Pennsylvania, guy and the Providence, Rhode Island, guy.

* Johnson, like most stars at MGM, suffered through the early 1950s with mediocre material. Despite some good roles (*Brigadoon*), he played in a series of dismal attempts to

revive screwball comedy: *The Big Hangover* (1950), *Three Guys Named Mike* (1951), and *Confidentially Connie* (1953), a really dumb movie that is essentially about red meat and how schoolteachers can't afford it on their low salaries. Johnson's durability as a star was severely tested by such material.

* Lon McCallister died on June 11, 2005.

* She's not yet *our* June Allyson either. In her stance, attitude, and singing style, she's clearly still a Betty Hutton understudy.

* June Allyson was one of the most popular stars of the 1940s and 1950s. For two decades she was a big name—in 1955, she was listed in the box office top ten—and she kept herself going through television, summer stock, and dinner theatre, finally returning to Broadway to star in *Forty Carats* in 1970. She did TV, toured in plays, wrote her autobiography, and was still beloved, with a large and loyal fan following, when she died on July 8, 2006.

* It's good to remember that small talents could inspire other stardoms. If Hollywood made a movie star out of Sonja Henie, a champion ice-skater, someone would also try to make one out of Belita, who also could skate (and so could Vera Hruba Ralston). Belita became a low-budget Henie in B films for Monogram, but at least she was *worthy* of a low budget.

† Iturbi's playing himself was something he shared with another famous piano player, Oscar Levant. (Levant also sometimes played a written character, as in *An American in Paris* [1951] or *The Band Wagon* [1953].) Levant, whether he was himself or a character, however, stood apart from the action and acted as an ironic commentator.

* Marion Hutton was also famous, initially more so than Betty. Today she's mostly forgotten, and shorts or movies that feature her as a singer sometimes confuse viewers. Isn't that Betty Hutton?, they wonder, watching Marion sing in *Orchestra Wives* (1942), for example. No. It's her beautiful, look-alike older sister, Marion, who also appeared with Abbott and Costello as the romantic lead in *In Society* (1944).

† In fact, Hutton was one of the few big-name female movie stars to become a best-selling record artist, having eleven top-ranked hits between 1944 and 1953. One of her biggest and best is still heard often today, "It Had to Be You" from 1944, which reached number 5 on the *Billboard* chart.

* Hutton's all-time hit record was "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief," which *Billboard* clocked as number one for two weeks running and which stayed on the charts for twenty weeks.

* Leisen cruelly said that Hutton "sincerely believed that she would win the Oscar...and nobody had the heart to tell her otherwise."

* Hutton died on March 11, 2007.

* Maureen O'Hara, the A-list doyenne of the harem picture, had previously established herself as a serious actress, but her exceptional beauty, particularly in Technicolor, doomed her to harem picture assignments. However, it was not her only métier. Yvonne De Carlo, another beauty first associated with such movies, would come along later, developed as a Maria Montez clone.

* Other reviewers, of course, didn't understand. Bosley Crowther in *The New York Times* said Montez played "with the hauteur of a tired nightclub showgirl in *Arabian Nights*." He was wrong. Montez was never tired.

* Eyeballing one of Miranda's "daytime" hats, in *The Gang's All Here*, Charlotte Greenwood mutters, "I see I'll have to watch my bell cords and lamp shades."

* Natalie Wood was popular, but not a name like O'Brien and never top box office *herself* as a child.

† O'Brien was born Angela Maxine O'Brien in January 1937. Listed as "Maxine O'Brien," she appeared in her first movie in December 1941: *Babes on Broadway*. She played a bit as a child actress who auditions for a dramatic role by crying, "Wait! Wait! Don't send my brother to the chair. Don't let him burn. Please, please, warden, please." Those were her first words on-screen and the sum total of her appearance. She was ranked in the top ten box office draws in 1945 and 1946. (Shirley Temple was listed in 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938, and 1939, six years to O'Brien's two, but O'Brien's record is impressive.)

* Laughton makes the most of every moment he's given. Playing the title ghost—the spirit of a cowardly ancestor cursed for deserting his kinsman in the moment of battle—he relishes such lines as, "Excuse me, I'm overdue now. I must gibber at the oriel window."

* Folklore has always claimed that director Minnelli got O'Brien to cry hysterically for this scene by telling her that her dog had died. O'Brien, saying she'd like to set the record straight, told the truth: She and June Allyson were known at the time to be MGM's best criers, and O'Brien felt competitive. To get her to bawl, her mother told her, "June's getting ahead of you, and people think she's the better actress. Maybe we should have the makeup man put on false tears." Hearing this, O'Brien said she *burst* into tears every time she thought of it. (An actress is an actress, it seems, no matter how old.)

* Lamarr and George Antheil developed a frequency-hopping radio system for remote guidance of torpedoes. The system was never used in the war, but it forms the basis of most modern wireless communication.

† Grable was born in 1916.

* No other female star to this date has ever achieved her record. Doris Day earned ten years, but not consecutively. Elizabeth Taylor earned nine years, but also not consecutively. Grable is the female box office champ.

* Grable retired from movies in 1955, but later revived her career on TV, in nightclubs, and on Broadway. She became one of a string of replacements for Carol Channing in *Hello, Dolly!*

CONCLUSION
STARDOM WITHOUT THE MACHINE



They don't make 'em like this anymore: Ann Sheridan, "the oomph girl."

The machine successfully supplied Hollywood with movie stars for nearly three decades. The discovery, the screen test, the makeover, the publicity, the casting to type—it all worked and it happened every day in the week.* Today, however, the movie business feels it doesn't have to create movie stars. Hollywood has shifted its goals. Stars aren't a primary asset that the studio needs to own, and they certainly aren't "the gods and goddesses of the silver screen." Manufacturing movie stars is no longer a priority—making blockbuster hits *is*. The "star" of a movie can be special effects, a big-name director, or controversial subject matter. William Goldman, the screenwriter who made the definitive statement about Hollywood—"Nobody knows anything"—summed up the situation: "As far as the filmmaking process is concerned, stars are essentially worthless and absolutely essential." This attitude—we'll use 'em, but who needs 'em—is exactly opposite of the old days when the business *knew* they were essential, though they might have treated them as if they were worthless.

As the studio system began its slow collapse during the 1950s, it took a while for Hollywood to grasp what was happening. By the end of the 1960s, most moviemakers realized that "movie star" magic was losing credibility. "Glamour is on life support," commented Joan Collins, "and is not expected to live." The days of the Movie Star who would put in fifty years at the top—a Joan Crawford or a Myrna Loy or a Jimmy Stewart or a Fred Astaire—were over. One of the last legendary stars to be born *inside* the studio system was Clint Eastwood, who went to the famous "star school" at Universal Studios in the 1950s but survived the collapse of that system by shrewdly moving to television and then to real fame by embracing international filmmaking. He defined his continued success by saying, "You've got to outlast yourself." (Eastwood, of course, is more than a movie star. He's in a class by himself with his Oscar-winning producer-director-actor-composer quadruple-hyphenate status. No rules define Eastwood, which is

why he can be called both the Last of the Oldtime Movie Stars *and* the First of the Modern Movie Stars.†)

This movement away from the glamour of the movie star system occurs in a gradual change that can nevertheless be *seen* on-screen and that *was* registered at the box office. A simplified way of observing the process is to look at the annual Motion Picture Exhibitor's polls of top ten box office stars. In 1960, the names on the list, in the order of popularity, were Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, Doris Day, John Wayne, Cary Grant, Sandra Dee, Jerry Lewis, William Holden, Tony Curtis, and Elvis Presley. With the exception of Presley, who became a movie star because he was a rock music phenomenon, every name on the list was developed by the studio system. The mix is typical of the golden era: three beautiful and talented women, five leading men of differing age groups and types, one comic, and a ringer, Presley.

By 1970, however, the number of great movie star personalities developed by Hollywood's star machine begins to wane. Paul Newman, John Wayne, and Jack Lemmon are on the list—and all are “Hollywood” stars.* The other seven names reflect change: Clint Eastwood, a product of the original system who found success outside its boundaries; Steve McQueen, a television star who moved onto the big screen; Barbra Streisand (the only woman), a name developed on Broadway and through the music business; Dustin Hoffman and Walter Matthau, two Broadway actors who weren't traditional handsome leading men; and Robert Redford, a Broadway and television actor, and the only new glamour boy in the group. The last two names on the list are surprising: Lee Marvin and Elliott Gould. Marvin is a star phenomenon. He was an authentic World War II hero who drifted into acting and made his movie debut in 1951. For years, he was strictly a character actor finding second-level success as a brutish villain. (Marvin is forever immortalized as the man who threw scalding coffee in Gloria Grahame's face in *The Big Heat* [1953].) As the old system collapsed, and censorship lessened, films became more and more violent, ultimately elevating the status of an actor like Marvin, who could credibly play a hero

for the new era: a man capable of terrible physical cruelty. During the early 1960s, Marvin hit the top by winning a Best Actor Oscar for *Cat Ballou*, a movie that used his type: He plays twins, his usual cinematic self—a rotten villain named Kid Shaleen—and a hilarious comedy variation of that role. Since Marvin had been fully confirmed cinematically as owning his own brutality, the send-up worked to perfection. Although Marvin had earned his chops at a non-star level in the old system, he emerged after it collapsed as something greater than the business had once thought he could be. He stands as a rebuke to the golden era, and his career causes one to wonder who else might have been more if given the chance.

Elliott Gould's name on the list gives pause. There is no one who, if asked to name a top box office star, would blurt out the name of Elliott Gould. Yet Gould was once the coolest, most emblematic guy on the street. From 1969 to 1975, his was the persona of the decade: the stoned dude who didn't much care what happened and accepted doom as his inevitable lot in life. In *M*A*S*H* (1970), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *California Split* (1974), and *Nashville* (1975), four movies directed by the man who knew best how to cast him, Robert Altman, Gould was the man of the hour. Today, Gould is a character actor of great humor and personality, but he is no one's idea of a movie star, much less a top box office draw. His presence on the 1970 list, alongside Lee Marvin, confirms the change that's occurring from the old to the new. Marvin is on the list because the newly violent film stories needed him (as in 1967's *The Dirty Dozen* and *Point Blank*), and Gould is on the list because he was a perfect star for a cynical hit movie, *M*A*S*H*. It's the dawn of an era in which the *movie* is the star, and the actor rides *its* coattails. In old Hollywood, the success of the movie had largely depended on the star. Now the success of the star would become dependent on the movie. Marvin and Gould prove the point.

As early as 1970, those who wanted to become movie stars were facing the news that they would have to operate the star machine for themselves. Faye Dunaway, who debuted in movies in 1967, said, "A star today has to take charge of every aspect of her career. There are no studios to do it for you." In today's movie world, all

actors are basically on their own, creating what CAA agent Rick Nicita described as a “free-for-all” atmosphere.

“Star” billing has become a floating designation according to the role being played. One day, Catherine Zeta-Jones is a “star” with the leading role in *The Mask of Zorro* (1998). The next, she steps down to “supporting actress” and even wins the Oscar in that category (as in *Chicago* [2002]). Michael Caine, Sean Connery, Kevin Bacon, Dennis Quaid—all are certified movie stars who sometimes play the lead and other times take on secondary roles. Even designated “stars” who’ve won Best Actor or Actress Oscars—Daniel Day-Lewis, Geoffrey Rush, Judi Dench—have no single character type and can disappear off the screen (and out of the newspapers) for as much as a year and never be missed, an unthinkable situation for a star in the past. Today, actors and actresses *float* across and around stardom. They take jobs as they choose, accepting whatever billing is appropriate to the role, keeping their careers moving from film to film, country to country, big-budget flick to small independent movie, from film to television to stage—whatever and wherever. Since there’s no longer one single system producing and exhibiting movies (Hollywood!), there’s no longer one simple system creating and defining stars for the public’s endorsement. In short, there is no star machine. It’s gone with the wind.

This would be good news to many of the movie stars of the past. The Cagneys and Davises and de Havillands fought hard to break the hold of the machine. The situation the modern movie actor enjoys is the situation they dreamed about and longed to have. By their standards, the life of today’s star is much improved and certainly at first glance it looks that way. Today’s stars can form their own production companies and sign one-time-only contracts for each film they make (or forge lucrative “multipicture” deals on their own terms). They can demand high salaries and even a percentage of the gate. They have powerful agents to negotiate deals for them.* They can confidently demand whatever perks they want: first-class air travel for their families, nannies for their children, days off, specific suites in specific hotels stocked with specific kinds of bottled water, and a cook and chauffeur at their beck and call

twenty-four hours a day. With the support of a clever (and powerful) agent, a movie star can shape a quality career, combine it with a sensible lifestyle, and demand the right to play Batgirl one day and Madame Curie the next. The opportunity for movie stars to “own” themselves has never been greater than it is today.

Nevertheless, what stars have traded to achieve this status tends to balance the books. In assessing the astronomical salaries top stars make (the big ones are called “the \$20-million club”), people forget that today’s actors have to assemble a mini-studio roster of personnel in order to operate. Stars have to pay for agents, business managers, lawyers, assistants, publicists, security staff, script developers, writers, fashion reps—all employees the old system kept under contract and made available to them. Today’s stars also have to sacrifice privacy on a 24/7 basis. The cocoon the studios wrapped around them is gone, and there is no organized protection against the paparazzi’s often cruel intrusion into their lives and no one keeping them from looking foolish. A modern actor who’s an idiot is revealed to *be* an idiot. Slow down your car on Sunset Boulevard to talk to a hooker and you’ll have to go on Jay Leno’s show to explain your charitable instincts. Dance on a tabletop without wearing a bra, and photos will capture the failed choreography. Marry in haste, and there’ll be no careful spin put on it by a cooperative studio flack bolstered by a staff of obliging fan magazine writers. When Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez conducted their front-page romance in the late 1990s, they became a laughingstock as the press ridiculed them, dubbed them Bennifer, and gleefully reported their aborted wedding plans.* Internet forums like Bizarre Hatred of Random Celebrities hum around the clock. Those who post to these forums know celebrity has a price, and they are more than willing to help the famous pay it. Brad Pitt described it: “Celebrity is bestial. The worst kind of karma because of the huge solitude it brings. You’re like a gazelle straying from the flock, and your path is cut off by lions.”

There may no longer be a star machine, but there *is* hype—so much so that the public has become immune to it. Where Cary Grant had five years to get his feet under him and made nearly

twenty-five films to learn his craft, modern actors are frequently touted as stars before the public has had a chance to see their work. Early in her career, Julia Ormond was called “the next Audrey Hepburn.” Despite remaking one of Hepburn’s hits (*Sabrina*) in 1995, Ormond’s career fizzled. She never became a star at all, much less an Audrey Hepburn replacement. Vin Diesel was hailed as “a sensational new star” before his first leading vehicle reached audiences, and Jennifer Garner—a TV star on *Alias*—was touted as “the new Julia Roberts” before Roberts herself had gotten old. The pressure on such beginners is extreme, and if the film they arrive in doesn’t live up to box office expectations—and their roles are not outstanding—they are dead before they’ve lived.[†]

In the 1990s, *Vanity Fair* magazine dubbed Matthew McConaughey “the new Paul Newman.”[‡] He then appeared in a long list of duds: *The Newton Boys* (1998), *EDtv* (1999), *U-571* (2000), *The Wedding Planner* (2001), and *Sahara* (2005). Cursed by the Newman label, even when he had a hit, such as *A Time to Kill* (1996) or *Contact* (1997), McConaughey was not taken seriously as real movie star material. Marked out as a wannabe, he nevertheless stuck with it and developed on his own terms, following the advice of his laid-back character from *Dazed and Confused* (1993): “Just gotta keep livin’.” McConaughey kept livin’, and ended up surviving a thirteen-year career of ups and downs. Now thirty-six, he’s suddenly a bona fide leading man, even unexpectedly turning up as *People* magazine’s “Sexiest Man Alive” in 2005.^{*} *People*’s label is proof of male stardom, and it comes with breathless prose worthy of old Hollywood’s flack system. Calling him “a guy with a twinkle in his eye...a one-man endorphin rush,” *People* coos: “Here’s a Hollywood star who’s happiest grilling steaks outside his Airstream camper with a can of Miller Lite in one hand, dirt beneath his toes, and his girl by his side.” Lest this should make him sound like too much of a lout, the magazine reassures readers that he’s “fluent in Spanish, cites the dictionary as his favorite book (‘I love to look up new words!’) and calls his mom every Sunday.” (Mom herself gave the magazine the definitive quote on why so many females became

his fans: “Those girls liked his butt.”) David Poland, editor of the Hollywood Insider Web site, has a different take on the endurance of McConaughey: “The industry always wants more movie stars, so there’s desperation at all times. Plus we’re in a period where there aren’t that many bankable stars. Matthew is a case where he’s proven he’s very good at doing the lanky, goofy, good-looking guy thing.” In other words, McConaughey made a strength out of *not* being Paul Newman. He hung out an “I’m an ordinary guy with a beer in my hand—and a cute butt” sign and made the grade. McConaughey survived by returning to the old Hollywood standards: Be a Dennis Morgan, let them write junk about you, do what roles you can. † For him it works, but it isn’t progress. McConaughey is a rare survivor of the “too much too soon” modern system of overhype.

By December 22, 2006, he was still a cover boy, appearing on the front of *Entertainment Weekly* alongside a headline that asks SEXIEST MAN ALIVE? OR SERIOUS ACTOR?, and reassuring readers that “the star of *We Are Marshall* wants to be both: ‘I have more to prove than ever before.’” McConaughey’s survival is a testament to a modern star’s allowing himself to be hyped in an old-fashioned way. His flaws are celebrated as assets. The magazine refers to his “Southern-fried charm,” his “old-fashioned masculinity,” and his ability to “bring the party with him wherever he goes.” Cleverly sliding past his problems, the story asks the key question that has been linked to McConaughey’s career from the very beginning: “Can McConaughey transcend his hunk-du-jour status and become the all-purpose dramatic movie star he was predicted to be?” McConaughey has managed to keep himself alive by walking the line between success and failure, and keeping the issue alive as an asset by constantly talking about the problem. “I feel like now I have more to prove than ever before,” he earnestly tells his interviewer. “Working hard. Creating ... and having fun. Want another beer?” McConaughey has found himself a persona. He is currently secure in a second-chance (or maybe third-chance) niche in romantic comedies. The movie star game today is not so much about becoming a legend as it is about

not having flops, not falling out of favor, not being ridiculed by critics. It's managing to just keep in the game, to stay at the table. Today, more than ever, you live to be a legend if you can survive.

Today's performers compete in a highly competitive arena. Audiences have many entertainment choices: movies, television, sports, music, regional theatre, the Internet, home formats like DVD, laserdiscs, and videotapes. Moviegoers grab up new talents quickly and discard them even faster. (Whereas it may be easier than ever to become a star because of all these choices, it's probably harder than ever to remain one.) Would-be movie stars also continue to face the same old business factors that lie outside their personal control. For instance, women still have trouble finding roles as they age, and if an "audience tracking system" tells the business that teenaged actors are hot, any actor who's not a teenager is out of luck. And even if they *are* teenagers, they face the age-old issues of whether or not the public likes them *and* their movies. A teenager cast in a stinker like Ashton Kutcher's *My Boss's Daughter* (2003) is going to flop because teenagers won't go to a bad film just because another teenager is in it. And if you are a hot teen actor, you've got only a small window of time in which you can make it happen for yourself. It's Deanna Durbin all over again!

It becomes obvious that, although much has changed for the good, actors in movies are still held hostage to the original concept of movie stardom. As Crawford said, "You've got to drag your weight at the box office." If you can't draw in the paying customers, you're dead—and today's business likes to blame the stars because they don't own them or have to care about them anymore. Modern stars are out front and easy targets. In an effort to avoid taking the rap for failure, they often loudly eschew the very concept of Movie Star, hoping to disassociate themselves from the inevitable moneymaking responsibilities.* They especially try to avoid typecasting. But although they have the opportunities to avoid it, they become caught up in its entanglements anyway. The fact is that audiences like their types, and they want movie actors to "mean" something specific on-screen.*

Audiences have always had basic types they want to see. Once there was Pola Negri, exotic foreign beauty, and then came Garbo, Dietrich, Hedy Lamarr, Sophia Loren, and now Zhang Ziyi and Gong Li. Rudolph Valentino, Latin lover, brought many imitators in his own day, but also gave rise to “foreign” lovers like Charles Boyer, Ricardo Montalban, Fernando Lamas, Rossano Brazzi, Omar Sharif—and Antonio Banderas. The emotional singer who can act—a Barbra Streisand or a Madonna—was born out of Judy Garland. Eastwood came from Henry Fonda and Gary Cooper. Ronald Colman hovers over David Niven and then James Mason and then Peter O’Toole and now Jude Law. The teenagers Lindsay Lohan and Hilary Duff, the young guys “making their way” (Jake Gyllenhaal, Zach Braff), the action heroes, the sex symbols, the “theatrical” actors—all these were types established when the movies were born. Today’s stars are not really different from those basic models. What’s worse, they have to live up to and compete with them. The originals have not gone away, thanks to easy access to old films on video, DVD, laserdisc, and television.[†] Both audiences and critics play the game of comparison: new stars to old. (Tom Hanks is “like Jimmy Stewart,” and Susan Sarandon is weighed against Bette Davis.) No actor escapes this historical scrutiny. A case in point is Jeremy Irons in his Oscar-nominated role of Claus von Bülow in *Reversal of Fortune* (1990). As Bulow, Irons is sly and elegant, projecting a muted ironic humor. He gives an impeccable performance, but some critics said he was doing a Cary Grant. It’s true that over his von Bülow hovers the shade of Grant—but it’s Grant without his good humor, his attractive touch of self-doubt, his loose acrobatic movement. (Irons’s von Bülow is Cary Grant only if Grant had put Katharine Hepburn into a coma when he socked her at the beginning of *The Philadelphia Story* [1940].) Irons is *not* Gary Grant—he’s Irons. And yet one scene in *Reversal of Fortune* shows clearly why the connection is made. Von Bülow shares a meal with a group of loud, hunched-over young law students who are rudely shoveling Chinese food into their gullets. By contrast, von Bülow holds himself aloof and eats in a neat, upper-crust manner, conveying a sense of

rigid intolerance of the behavior around him in the most gentlemanly way possible. Irons's eyes glitter with a well of hidden malice. His von Bülow's manners are too good to allow his real disgust to show on the surface, but nevertheless it's clear he more than disapproves. He's quietly appalled.

It's that soupçon of distance—of contained disapproval—that triggers audience movie memories. Suddenly it's Cary Grant among noisy teenagers, trying to win a potato sack race in *The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer* (1947), it's Grant critically prowling the wedding-decked halls of the trivial rich in *Philadelphia Story*, it's Grant pulling back in sudden understanding of the cruel machinations of the spy system in *Notorious* (1946). It's Cary Grant in all his glory, quietly telegraphing the viewer that he stands apart, the stranger at the feast, but the one—the only one—who sees the truth about the situation. Irons is a terrific actor, and he *owns* Claus von Bülow, but he's facing the curse of the modern movie actor: comparison with the legendary stars of the past.* The ghost of Cary Grant, of course, is one no movie actor can live with.

There are former stars whose shadow doesn't have to become a shroud, such as Tyrone Power. As has been said, Power was an actor with real talent whose stardom (and glamour) prevented him from fulfilling his acting potential. If Tyrone Power came along today, what would be different? At first, it might seem a useless comparison because the business no longer tries to turn beautiful young men who look good in tuxedos into "movie stars." However, movies still hire beautiful young men, and some of them still become what we call stars, and some do it by wearing tuxedos. In fact, we have five Tyrone Power look-alikes in the movies today: Pierce Brosnan, Brendan Fraser, Colin Farrell, Antonio Banderas, and Johnny Depp. The death of the star machine means that each of these men has the freedom that Power lacked. Are they free from his concerns and disappointments? Pierce Brosnan broke into show business strictly because of his looks. And his looks, like Power's, are fabulous. Brosnan says he began his career "as a male ingenue opposite Elizabeth Taylor" in 1980's Agatha Christie adaptation, *The Mirror Crack'd*. (It was a bit part as her lover in a movie-within-the-

movie. In other words, he started out by playing a movie star.) Brosnan then found fame on television as a character called Remington Steele. Steele was a joke—a façade used by a clever female detective who found that no one would hire her because she was a woman. She solved her problem by hiring Steele as her front man. Brosnan's looks were thus the very point of this role: He could wear clothes well and look suave à la Tyrone Power, but—at least initially—he was *only* a good-looking clotheshorse, with the female detective providing the brains. Brosnan's looks were used to make a *joke* about good-looking guys and their images.

When Brosnan left television to enter films, he remembered what he had learned from *Remington Steele*. He didn't let himself become locked into “pretty boy” roles. He never let his Powerish good looks limit him. He played a Russian villain in *Fourth Protocol* (1987), a British colonial in an adaptation of a Joyce Cary novel, *Mister Johnson* (1990), an FBI bomb expert in *Live Wire* (1992), and the good-looking “schnook” other man à la Ralph Bellamy in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993). Perhaps his most bizarre performance was in the virtual reality film *The Lawnmower Man* (1992), where he was seen as a scientist conducting experiments in drug therapy and computer instruction. All in all, not a Tyrone Power filmography! Brosnan became a recognized face, but not quite a *real* star, until he was offered the glamorous lead in the James Bond franchise (and he was forty-two). His first Bond movie, *GoldenEye* (1995), elevated him to a true international stardom. Brosnan stepped into Bond's shoes and was instantly at home there, easily displaying both the grace and the glamour required for the role on screen. From 1995 to 2005, he *was* James Bond: In addition to *GoldenEye*, he made *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), *The World Is Not Enough* (1999), and *Die Another Day* (2002). In 2005, however, he was unceremoniously dumped from the role. What might have been a career-ending disaster for another actor, Brosnan accepted with a shrug. “I thought, F—it!” he said. “I can do anything I want to do now. I'm not beholden to them or anyone. I'm not shackled by some contracted image...I feel this wonderful sense of liberation.” (Tyrone Power would have loved to say these words around 1946.)

Brosnan's cavalier attitude was possible because he'd been smart. And the system had allowed it. If he had played nothing but Bond during his decade of success in the role, he might have suddenly found himself out of work at fifty-two. Instead, while he was riding high as the supercool superspy, he had wisely proved himself in other glamorous roles (the remake of *The Thomas Crown Affair* in 1999), but also as a viable name actor for serious independent movies such as *Evelyn* (2002). In *Evelyn* he was an Irish father without an elegant wardrobe or a sassy sex appeal, just an ordinary man trying to unite his family—and he was good. He was confident about letting go of his Tyrone Power-like handsome leading man self: "I created the stereotype," he said. "I can destroy it. This is my destroying period." And he wasn't kidding. One has only to view him in his 2005 "departure" film, *The Matador*, to realize how far he's willing to go. "Now that I'm becoming an old lion," he said, "I can shake the cage a bit and stretch." "Stretch" barely covers it for *Matador*. Brosnan had always been willing to let himself be used as an object of humor—from Remington Steele to James Bond, his glamour had always contained an amused tone. In *Matador*, a hilarious send-up of his own looks and style and Bond persona, he's a boozy old hit man who's lost his need to care about much of anything. In the midst of his performance, Brosnan, playing hungover and distracted, walks across a hotel lobby wearing nothing but his underwear and a pair of cowboy boots in a showstopping moment that finally puts to rest any hint of Tyrone Power's ghost. Brosnan has been able to do what Power longed for: be glamorous in some roles, but a serious actor in others. His looks have never become his limitation. Still young and handsome, Brosnan has nevertheless appeared on-screen looking old, scruffy, dragged out, and deglamorized—something the studio system would never have allowed with Tyrone Power. (Even when he was being tortured, Power looked well-barbered.) In looks and style, Brosnan is a definite link to the movie stars of the past, but he'd never be thought of as "today's Tyrone Power." He's shown us his Power—but also his Cary Grant, his Errol Flynn, his Sean Connery, his Ralph Bellamy—and he's working on his Claude Rains.

Brendan Fraser is a good-looking guy who, if he had come along in 1938, would have been snapped up by 20th Century–Fox as a Tyrone Power clone or perhaps a John Payne type (assuming that Payne himself wasn't a Power clone). Fraser's fate would have, in fact, probably been much like that of John Payne. The system would have taken him only at face value, appreciating his looks, his breezy air, and his comfortable sexuality. Without bothering to develop him any further—why would they?—they would have given Fraser a solid “second tier” stardom like that of Payne and Dennis Morgan. Like them, he would have been useful in different genres—musicals, comedies, adventure films, westerns—and his type would have been simply defined as “handsome hunk leading man.” The fact he could have done more would not have interested the system, who didn't need him to *be* more.

Fraser's case demonstrates how some of the problems of the old system endure. His ability to play different types has turned him into “no visible type,” which means that no one in the business is saying “it's a Brendan Fraser role” when they're reading scripts. Fraser has managed his career well, and his filmography has startling variety. He has been cast in a bittersweet comedy (*The Scout* [1994], in which he's an emotionally fragile baseball phenomenon), in a highly serious drama (*The Quiet American* [2002]), in a social satire (*Blast from the Past* [1999]), in a rollicking adventure-horror series (*The Mummy* [1999] and *The Mummy Returns* [2001]), and in the kind of “dumb ox beefcake” roles most people associate him with, *Encino Man* (1992) and *George of the Jungle* (1997), in which he is actually sweetly comic and adorably sexy. Even when he appears in a “serious” art-house film such as *Gods and Monsters* (1998), Fraser is essentially playing a “dim hunk,” even though it's one allowing himself to be admired by a man he only belatedly realizes is gay. As Roger Ebert wrote about this character, he's “slow to understand.” Fraser's role is different in tone from his roles in other films, but not in its bottom line. Fraser has a solid presence as an all-purpose, Tyrone Power–handsome leading man, but he hasn't been able to turn his looks upside down the way Pierce Brosnan has. Fraser's career limps along, because—

as would have been true with the old system—no one has the imagination to see his potential.

Is Fraser's fate different today from what it would have been in the 1930s or '40s? Now that Hollywood doesn't grind out four hundred movies a year and doesn't need a second tier of genre stars, can he make a serious career for himself? The system today is doing the same thing to him that the old one would have. He works steadily, but he doesn't reach the top—and he's not allowed to grow. Is Brendan Fraser's stardom as successful as Tyrone Power's? No. Is he nevertheless better off than Power? Yes. The bottom line is that Brendan Fraser has more options than Power, but the system still holds him back as it did his predecessor. In the end, Brendan Fraser's stardom will probably be a lot smaller than that of the man he looks like.

Colin Farrell *really* looks like Tyrone Power. He has thick eyelashes, dark hair, Irish charm, a disarming smile, sex appeal, and real talent. After his career got under way, Farrell seemed on track to become what Power dreamed of becoming: a truly serious actor. Farrell made the moody war film *Tigerland* (2000), worked with Al Pacino in *The Recruit* (2003), and did the independent *Intermission* (2003) and the controversial *A Home at the End of the World* (2004). He could make the choices that Power never could, and took the roles that Power would have killed to have. Suddenly, however, Farrell took a strange turn, opting to play in the sort of silly costume movies that Power was forced to do. First, Farrell made the lumpen *Alexander* (2004), standing around with his hair dyed blond and bracelets jingling on his arm. Then he traded in his chiton for a ruffled shirt and got himself tied up by Indians in *The New World* (2005). His follow-up to these two financial failures was what could be called a contemporary costume film, *Miami Vice* (2006), which seeks to re-create the 1980s so he can wear Don Johnson's pleated pants and shoes with no socks.

Farrell's private life has gone equally askew. Showing signs that he couldn't take the exposure or pressure of modern fame, he embarked on an offscreen lifestyle as a jumped-up "star" when he

had not yet fully earned the accolade. Without the discipline of the former system, and without the “machine” to protect him, Farrell suddenly became more of the new Errol Flynn than the new Tyrone Power. His is a case where it can be seen that the control of the former star system might have helped him. Where he’ll end up is anybody’s guess. He is in danger of being seen as more of a celebrity than an actor, the Paris Hilton of the male neo-stars. Farrell may turn out to be another example of someone who was called a star too soon, without having earned it. To date, he represents the waste of the chances that were denied to men like Tyrone Power, and he has not delivered on what he appears to be: the big box office champion of his era.

Antonio Banderas is the ethnic truth of what Tyrone Power was often asked to portray—an authentic Spanish hero. Although Power was cast as a matador in *Blood and Sand* and an Indian doctor in *The Rains Came*, he wasn’t remotely ethnic. He was cast in such roles because his looks were perceived to be exotic. His looks *were* exotic—his essence was not. For both the audience and the business, he was reassuringly, safely pseudo ethnic. Proof that times have changed is that Banderas can be himself—a Spanish actor—as well as a box office Tyrone Power type. (Banderas was even cast in Power’s old role of Zorro in 1998’s *The Mask of Zorro*.) Banderas’s heavy Spanish accent doesn’t limit him, requiring him to become a Latin Charles Boyer, nor does it relegate him to roles as villains and sidekicks.*

Banderas looks a great deal like Power. He has a similar nose, the same lush eyelashes, heavy brows, and dark, brooding eyes, but he’s a less aristocratic presence, which makes him more useful in today’s movies. Like Power, Banderas is serious about his acting and has made clear that he wants to branch out into both directing and producing. Banderas made his name in theatre and films in Spain before coming to America, and he did not arrive on the scene as an inexperienced young glamour boy. His background included the “art films” of Pedro Almodóvar, and he always knew what he wanted from his movie career, which was not just stardom, but also the freedom of choice. At the peak of his popularity, he left Hollywood

to appear on Broadway in a revival of *Nine*, a choice the studio would not have allowed Power during his top years of stardom. Banderas has also taken on risky film roles, such as Che in *Evita* (1996), and he shows every sign of being able to age gracefully, steer his own fate, and manage the business of his career. He emerges as the essence of what Tyrone Power was supposed to be in movies, and of what Tyrone Power wanted to be both on- and offscreen—a wonderful actor with a strong screen presence.

Early in his career, Johnny Depp, who has all the glamour of the old system's male stars, looked as if he might turn out to be a watered-down Tyrone Power. But he began to select roles for himself that were less those of the conventional handsome leading man. Depp started becoming seriously cuckoo on-screen, willing to go to the mat with strange characterizations. ("I've always been drawn to those fringe types...the whole 'we who are not as others' thing.") He became the anti-Power, willing to show gold teeth, leave his hair unwashed, and hide himself in any ridiculous disguise. He proved he could sing and dance and camp it up in an Elvis imitation (*Cry-Baby* [1990]), do outrageous comedy, be an adventurer like Errol Flynn, a ladies' man, or anything else. In the summer of 2003, he put on a big hat with a feather in it, stuffed his feet into some tall boots, and single-handedly drove *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003) out of the ordinary and onto the top of the box office heap. Depp went more than over the top. He went around the moon and back again. Around the same time, his hilariously mythic portrayal of a corrupt CIA agent in *Once upon a Time in Mexico* (2003) confirmed the sense that he was not going to settle for being a modern-day Tyrone Power. In *Mexico*, Depp arrives on-screen wearing sunglasses to hide that fact that his eyes have been poked out. Looking at the blood streaks that are dried on his cheeks, and listening to him yell at his cabdriver (who is asking him to look at the revolution in the streets)—"I can't see, fuck-mook! I have no eyes!"—audiences roar with delight. Depp is a glorious parody of Greek tragedy, with just the right touch of the horror film thrown in. Depp is willing to make an on-screen mess of himself, clearly driving himself away from a Power-like career and toward the latter-day Marlon Brando. ("I was

freaked out about being turned into a product. That really used to bug me.”) Like Brando, Depp has begun to treat his beauty with disrespect. He forces the audience to deal with him on his own terms—as an actor, not as a beautiful movie star.* “I never wanted to build a movie star career,” he said. “I don’t even understand that kind of thinking. If anything, mine has been a career of failures...It wasn’t that I was rejecting Hollywood. I was rejecting the idea of becoming a product.” Proving his point, Depp has opted to interpret roles in contradictory, non-star-driven ways. He’s usually flamboyant, but sometimes he’s not: for instance, in his portrayal of J. M. Barrie in 2004’s *Finding Neverland*. Barrie, the creator of Peter Pan, today lives under a cloud of suspicion that, as Depp put it in an interview, “he was a little bit sideways with the kids.” Depp chose *not* to play him that way (“That’s an easy way to go, isn’t it?”) and instead tried to create a Barrie who was like one of his own characters: a fragile being, held in thrall to his own childhood innocence.

In the 1950s, when the handsome young Marlon Brando turned toward oddball performances with Southern accents, long dresses, and dyed hair, his audiences began to desert him, not being prepared to see their glamour boy wig out. Today, audiences don’t respect stardom or want it preserved at all costs. They love it when an actor makes fun of his own persona. Time will tell as to whether Depp, unlike Brando, can get away with it and keep his eccentricity under control. Will he also weigh three hundred pounds in fifteen years? Or will he master the madness and emerge as the great American actor everyone thought Brando would become? Depp has not only proved he can play anything or anybody—he’s shown us he’s willing to do so.

Brosnan, Fraser, Farrell, Banderas, and Depp—these actors all mix an old-fashioned movie star charisma with a new-star acting freedom. They illustrate where things are today. They are stars in the movies, but they aren’t movie stars like Tyrone Power. They are examples of what we might call “the neo-star”—the actor who floats between typecasting and character acting, building a reputation as well as an audience loyalty as they alternate from one to the other.

The neo-star is the end result of a compromise between the audience and the actor. As the old star system became obsolete, actors in movies began to be slightly embarrassed by the term “movie star” because it implied beauty, sex appeal, and no talent. They wanted to be Olivier, not Gable. The public, however, was not easily robbed of its fantasies. They refused to abandon type, stubbornly settling for modern movie actors to be defined by a specific “type” of *role*, which is not the same thing as the typecasting of the past. The difference is subtle but specific: Today’s actors become famous for their ability to play a certain *role*. (Yesterday’s stars became famous because fans believed they *were* that role and just “playing themselves.”) Thus, De Niro plays the “De Niro role,” and Al Pacino the “Pacino role” and Dustin Hoffman the “Hoffman role” and Jack Nicholson the “Nicholson role.”* De Niro has nailed down the tough, mean Julius Caesar of the streets; Pacino, the wrecked, instinctive genius; Hoffman, the Everyguy; and Nicholson, well, he does the “Jack role.” Nicholson today has become the uncrowned king of Hollywood—uncrowned because he would never have anything to do with a coronation ceremony. It wouldn’t be cool. He’s our antiestablishment guy, and going to keep it that way both on and off the screen. He avoids talk shows and the usual entertainment circuits, although being thoroughly professional, he’ll grant print interviews to promote new films if necessary. Nicholson has true movie star aura: He’s untouchably remote and cool, yet he sits on the floor at every Lakers basketball game, just one of the crowd rooting for his team. He eschews stardom, taking real gambles with movies like *The Passenger* (1975) and *Hoffa* (1992). A three-time Oscar winner, he has guided his own career and made intelligent choices, including cultural turning points (*Easy Rider* [1969], *Carnal Knowledge* [1971]), genuine classics (*Chinatown* [1974], *The Shining* [1980]), off-the-wall casting (the Joker in *Batman* [1989]), supporting roles (*A Few Good Men* [1992]), comedies (*Something’s Gotta Give* [2003] and *As Good as It Gets* [1997]), risk-taking small movies (*The King of Marvin Gardens* [1972] and *About Schmidt* [2002]). “Cinema is what it’s all about for me,” says Nicholson, and he doesn’t have to prove it. His

filmography does. With Jack Nicholson, the era of the neo-star truly arrived: A movie star could be a movie star except when he or she was busy being an actor.

Male neo-stars—who outnumber their female counterparts—are men like Harrison Ford and Mel Gibson (the older set) and Brad Pitt, Russell Crowe, Keanu Reeves, and George Clooney (the younger group).^{*} Each represents how today’s actors have to accomplish two things: create their own familiar role type and break with it to prove their acting chops. Once actors began to claim their right to both, audiences began to want both from them. An ability to be both actor and star in a way that the public will allow—and pay to see—is the mark of the neo-star. The careers of Ford, Gibson, Reeves, Pitt, Crowe, and Clooney illustrate how it works today.

HARRISON FORD IS NOW one of the oldest of the neo-star set. He came to prominence in the late 1970s and early 1980s in a series of blockbuster hits that made him instantly legendary: *Star Wars* (1977), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), and *Blade Runner* (1982). Significantly, he had already made himself famously independent of the acting profession when, after years of trying to make it, he taught himself carpentry as a backup profession. (Talk about choices!) Ford actually built himself enough financial security to pick and choose his roles when he was still an unknown. Furthermore, his independence gave him a confidence and self-possession other actors in his age category didn’t all have. This was reflected on-screen as a genuinely masculine presence. During the 1980s, he seemed to own the “I am a man” franchise in Hollywood. If a movie called for a WASP with gravitas who could still look youthful while running through the jungle snapping a bullwhip over his fedora, there was one big-name choice: Harrison Ford. His is a strange aura: Although often impish and playful, he’s never boyish. He came seemingly burdened with a middle-aged weariness, a built-in sense that, if something could go wrong, it would. And he would have to cope. Ford has often been compared to Gary Cooper, because both are the clichéd “strong, silent type,” projecting an

innate, very grounded sense of decency coupled with a grim determination to get the job done. Underneath their quiet surfaces lies the very American sense that you'll wish you'd never been born if you push them too far.

In his early years he cheerfully played irresponsible—Han Solo and Indiana Jones—and saved such characters from one-dimensionality by the force of his on-screen presence. He made viewers believe they had more to them than surface fun. He gave them latent qualities of love and loyalty. On the one hand, he presented a Douglas Fairbanks swagger, joyfully dashing through escapist adventures, tossing a sharp line of dialogue over his shoulder. On the other, he took on some serious acting chores—too serious, it might be said, as in *The Mosquito Coast* (1986) or *Regarding Henry* (1991). He's developed a variety of shadings on his basic American guy: a stalwart hero who endures under siege (*Patriot Games* [1992]), a romantic lover (*Random Hearts* [1999]), a modern working man (*Working Girl* [1988], *Presumed Innocent* [1990]), an attempt at villainry (*What Lies Beneath* [2000]), and even his out-and-out comedy self, as in *Six Days Seven Nights* (1998), in which he plays a raffish old reprobate in the tropics, a role right out of the Cary Grant book for Older Actors (Grant in *Father Goose* [1964]).

As he has aged, Ford has become more like William Holden than Gary Cooper. He's more urban, more complex, and is playing confused husbands, burdened leaders, and beleaguered institutional employees. His dignity now has more distance than contained grace. Critics have started to attack him for his age, the sure sign that something is going wrong. The release of his 2006 failure, *Firewall*, brought these headlines: "An Aging Action Hero," "Harrison Bored," "The Action Hero of the AARP Set." Reviews were cruel, calling him "a bona fide A-lister who regularly *used to* headline studio tentpoles." Everyone focused on his age, and he himself said, "Some mysterious number appears to be attached to my name, and all of a sudden I'm not supposed to be able to do [action scenes]. It doesn't make much sense." Sense or not, Ford hasn't had a genuine box

office hit since 2000. According to *Variety*, he had prior to that date been responsible for \$3.25 billion in box office sales, but his last big hit was listed as 1997's *Air Force One*. His two flops, *K-11: The Widowmaker* in 2002 and *Hollywood Homicide* in 2003, together earned a total of only \$66 million. In the first, he played a Russian submarine commander, and in the second a down-on-his-luck low-level homicide cop who sold real estate on the side to make a living. His attempts to vary his image, unlike those of Pierce Brosnan, have not been successful.

It remains to be seen whether or not Ford can survive the transition period he's in. *The New York Times* summed him up in 2006 by saying, "He became a star by giving and taking punches, for being a rakishly handsome performer who transcended the limits of his acting with charm and intense physicality." In other words, he became a star by doing what male movie stars had always done. Ford's career can never be written off. Proof lies on the Web site fametracker.com, which delights in debunking celebrities. This uncompromising forum has pegged Harrison Ford as today's ultimate star, the standard from which all others in Hollywood can only deviate.*

If Harrison Ford was a rogue with a heart of gold during the 1980s, the Australian Mel Gibson during that same time frame played a total freaking psycho. His filmography contains the proof: *Mad Max* (1979), *Gallipoli* (1981), *The Road Warrior* (1981), and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982). With his original claim-to-fame role, *Mad Max*, he began playing what would become a literal cliché for him—the loner who's been made nihilistic, reckless, and possibly even psychotic by the loss of his family or loved ones. This theme crops up in various forms not only in *Mad Max* but in *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *Braveheart* (1995), *Payback* (1999), *Ransom* (1996), *The Patriot* (2000), and even *Signs* (2002). He plays loners damaged in other ways in *Conspiracy Theory* (1997) and *The Man Without a Face* (1993). Gibson illustrates one of the true perks of today's neo-star system, which allows an actor more freedom. In 2006, he was arrested for driving drunk, and unleashed a highly publicized anti-Semitic rant, confirming for fans their sense of his wild-eyed screen

persona. Originally, audiences were told charming anecdotes about his reputation as a crazy practical joker. These little tales turned out to be harbingers about what makes him tick offscreen and confirmation of what audiences like about him: He seems truly dangerous. (He would have been shut down in the old days.) Prior to his very public disgrace (for which he issued an apology), Gibson's career was perhaps the best overall proof of what a neo-star can do. In one very, very bold year—1990—he played both Hamlet (yes, *that* Hamlet) and a high-flying CIA smuggler in the action-comedy *Air America*. (This would be akin to Olivier's doing *Hamlet* in 1944 and playing Danny Kaye's role in the musical military comedy *Up in Arms* at the same time. I wouldn't have minded seeing that, actually.)

Gibson has been one of the few neo-stars to emerge with a strong cinematic vision as a creator. Only George Clooney stands as a potential rival to Gibson in this regard. (Kevin Costner also attempted to direct, but after a successful start with *Dances with Wolves* [1990], he overreached and sank his career.) As early as 1993, Gibson directed himself in *The Man Without a Face*, the story of a disfigured former teacher wrongly accused of child abuse, and in 1995 he helmed *Braveheart*, the story of Scottish rebel William Wallace. Both projects, with their themes of unjustified yet redemptive suffering, turned out to be rehearsals for Gibson's personal Great White Whale, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). With unswerving commitment, Gibson labored for years to bring his intense personal vision of the Christ story to the screen. The box office success of the project stunned Hollywood, caused controversy, and incited whispers of sadomasochism for its blow-by-blow depictions of physical torture. But anyone who had ever paid any attention to Gibson's career over the years should have seen it coming from as far back as the apocalyptic *Mad Max*. Gibson proves that the intensity that actors had always had to summon to become stars could do more than just sell tickets for other people's projects. It can also form visions of its own, bringing all its latent threats and promises into concrete form. What passionate projects might we

have seen if actors such as Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, Davis, and Stanwyck could have been neo-stars?

Brad Pitt also harks back to the old style of movie star in that much of his appeal does come from his angelic looks. If a plastic surgeon could create the perfect modern face for a man, it would be Brad Pitt's. He is the ultimate in contemporary male beauty, which is actually the great thing about his stardom. Movies, after all, are supposed to be fun. It's a tough job (as Tyrone Power could attest), but somebody's got to do it.

Brad Pitt as a neo-star has *not* branched out into Broadway, other kinds of theatre, or television. His allegiance is strictly to the movies. He has shown no ambition to direct or produce in any serious way (beyond possessing his own obligatory production company), but has instead remained an actor first and foremost. Where he has exercised his freedom is in choosing projects that might never have gotten made in the old studio system. These include the profoundly homoerotic *Interview with the Vampire* (which also represented a daring choice for his co-star Tom Cruise) in 1994, the graphically violent *Seven* (1995), and the gloriously schizophrenic *Fight Club* (1999). Like most long-lasting neo-stars, Pitt has balanced these edgy choices with easier fare, like the 1998 romantic comedy *Meet Joe Black* (in which he played a very good-looking and sexy Death), the thriller *Spy Game* (2001), the sophisticated comedy *Ocean's Eleven* (2001), and the prestige pictures *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997) and *Troy* (2004).

It's a startling list of unusual films for a star who was first noticed on-screen because he was a hot-looking hitchhiker, a real down-and-dirty drifter (*Thelma & Louise* [1991]). Pitt was cut out to be a sex symbol, and that is what he would have been in the old system. With the freedom of a neo-star, he's been able to make other choices. Originally a bad-ass type, he was "cleaned up real good" to become a more noble, romantic hero, muting his sex appeal to domesticate him for a higher fame.

It is interesting to note, however, that many of these "safer" choices have actually been among the worst failures of Pitt's career. *Seven* and *Fight Club*, by contrast, were huge hits. Pitt is thus one of

the few neo-stars whose star persona is *located in*, rather than denied by, his edgier projects. He is also one of the new breed of neo-stars who maintain their fame somewhat separately from their box office returns. Everyone considers him to be an enormously profitable star, but his movies haven't always been moneymakers. *The Devil's Own* (1997), *Seven Years in Tibet*, *Meet Joe Black*, *Fight Club*, *The Mexican* (2001), *Spy Game*, and *Troy* all performed under expectations. (*Ocean's Eleven*, one of his hits, was not a star vehicle for him, but an ensemble piece, and even its sequel, *Ocean's Twelve*, was not a big success.) Pitt's 2005 action comedy, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, however, was huge, partly because of the offscreen gossip it generated when he left his wife, Jennifer Aniston, to take up with his co-star, Angelina Jolie. Pitt has had many box office failures—too many, it would seem, for a star of his magnitude. Yet by expertly handling his public relations, he has continued to generate buzz. So far, he has proved willing to live publicly in order to maintain his fame. However, he has recently begun to look as if he genuinely hates what celebrity has done to his personal life. Time will reveal whether he will want to make further use of the options modern stardom offers him.

Keanu Reeves is the clearest example of a neo-star who has used his freedom to branch out as far as possible. But then, he came into movie fame from far left field, finding his first success in the nihilistic indie project *River's Edge* (1986). He next found prominence playing comedy roles in two surprise hits, *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989) and *Parenthood* (1989). For him, these two films were excursions into mainstream star persona. They were negative experiences because people believed that he really *was* the slacker “whoah” dude. They made fun of him, calling him stupid and insisting that he couldn't act. To this day, he is still haunted by his stoned, dudely performances in these roles; every contemporary actor who essays a stoner invokes Reeves. Refusing, however, to be limited by this, he made the action movie *Point Break* (1991), played a bisexual hustler in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), and did the costume drama *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992). In retrospect, it is easy to see that Reeves was thinking strategically and laying the

groundwork to refuse any kind of typecasting. He has maintained that goal, appearing over the years in action movies (*Speed* [1994]), science fiction movies (*The Matrix* [1999]), romances (*A Walk in the Clouds* [1995]), romantic comedies (*Something's Gotta Give* [2003]), and even a horror film (*The Devil's Advocate* [1997]). Besides those varied projects, Reeves has worked extensively onstage and has also chosen to play supporting roles or even cameos in a number of offbeat films such as *Much Ado About Nothing* (1993), *Freaked* (1993), *The Last Time I Committed Suicide* (1997), *Me and Will* (1999), and *Thumbsucker* (2005). He has also gone *seriously* against type by playing a serial killer in *The Watcher* (2000) and a thuggish wife beater in *The Gift* (2000).

Reeves is a neo-star fighting the concept of stardom itself, working steadily against persona to the point where no one has a clear idea of who Reeves is on- screen anymore. This has hurt him, but it has also allowed him to maintain the versatility that means more to him than fame. In the old studio system, Reeves would have been forced to go on playing his slacker dude for as long as it made money. His career would have been limited, and thus short-lived. Instead, he has used his freedom to move on and slowly force audiences to accept him as a real actor.

It's clear now that at first everyone underestimated George Clooney. He perfectly embodies the opportunities open to neo-stars if they have vision. He made Oscar history in 2006 by being nominated for Best Director, Best Writer (both for *Good Night and Good Luck*), and Best Supporting Actor for *Syriana*.^{*} Never before had someone been nominated for directing one film and acting in another in the same year. This achievement shows the degree to which Clooney, who rose to fame playing a hunky television doctor on *ER*, has emerged as a serious artistic player in Hollywood. That *Good Night and Good Luck* and *Syriana* are both ambitious political films about the United States shows that Clooney has the focus of an auteur.

Clooney is similar to Harrison Ford: He seems to be a grown-up, masculine type who has a quietly sarcastic take on the events that happen around him. He lacks Ford's intensity, however, and Ford's

lurking ability to go quietly berserk if pushed too far. He's likable, but he has no moral outrage. He's always going to be on the sly side. Clooney has played this shrewdly by tending to choose dry, sophisticated projects such as *Out of Sight* (1998); *Ocean's Eleven*; *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000); and the romantic comedy *Intolerable Cruelty* (2003). The ghost of Cary Grant at his most urbane and devil-may-care looms gently over each of these choices, but Clooney holds his own; he comes in second to no one. He makes perfect use of neo-stardom.

Russell Crowe represents an important aspect of being a neo-star, which is the freedom to act like a jerk. ("I'm just a bloke...a little furry animal.") Although Crowe's publicists try to put a positive spin on him, Crowe has broken out of their control, using the freedom to steal a page from the old Romantics and present himself as an artiste, a purely creative soul who neither wants nor needs to make any concessions to convention. In the old days, there was a certain amount of room for troubled stars (Robert Walker), but in general, studios sold movie stars as happy, grateful creatures. Acting itself was not supposed to be a source of agony or plumbing one's greatest depths or going to Method extremes. For Crowe, however, that is what acting is. He's an outcast nineteenth-century French painter of an actor, and as long as he pulls his weight at the box office, he can get away with living out that image as much as he wants.

Crowe's ability to play anything could have been either a problem (no type) or an asset (he could have been Paul Muni) in the former star system. He has, with the freedom of neo-stardom, been able to prove himself to be a versatile and sensitive actor in many different types of roles. However, he appears to have used up some of his credibility in Hollywood with his offscreen antics. (Many believe he lost the Best Actor Oscar for *A Beautiful Mind* [2001] because he had alienated so many in Hollywood.) Crowe is a classic case of the pros and cons of both systems.

For today's female neo-stars, the story is not unlike what it was for the great females of the past: It's harder to last at the box office. In early 2006, the top ten movie actresses ranked by the salaries they could command were, from the highest (\$20 million per film)

to the lowest (\$9 million) were 1. Julia Roberts; 2. Nicole Kidman; 3. and 4. tied, Reese Witherspoon and Drew Barrymore; 5. Renée Zellweger; 6. and 7. tied, Angelina Jolie and Cameron Diaz; 8. Jodie Foster; 9. Charlize Theron; and 10. Jennifer Aniston. (Within weeks of the posting of this list, Reese Witherspoon won the Oscar for her role in *Walk the Line* and negotiated a \$30 million paycheck for her next announced film, *Our Family Trouble*, and moved herself ahead of Roberts and into the number-one position.)* Witherspoon, who entered films in 1991 with *The Man in the Moon*, rose to the very top in 2005, and she has a reputation in the business for hard work and super-seriousness on her sets. (“I’m not passing margaritas out in my trailer after work,” she admits. “I’m not frivolous and carefree.”) She’s more like her predecessors, Davis, Crawford, Stanwyck, in her determination and focus. She could end up being the one who stays in the business for the long haul.†

The paychecks available to the top females seem huge, but when the overall box office listings are studied, it is still dominated by male stars. The top ten rankings for 2005 were: 1. Tom Cruise (who had won the annual poll seven times); 2. Johnny Depp; 3. Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt (tied); followed by Vince Vaughn, George Clooney, Will Smith, Reese Witherspoon, Adam Sandler, and the previous year’s number-one-spot winner, Tom Hanks.‡ There are only two women on the list: Jolie, who’s linked to Brad Pitt through their offscreen romance and on-screen hit, *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2005), and the newcomer Reese Witherspoon—a thin representation of the top moneymaking female stars. Julia Roberts, Nicole Kidman, Sandra Bullock, and Angelina Jolie make good representatives for the situation for actresses in movies today. They, too, need their own type and have the opportunity for “departure”—a neo-stardom—but their time span is shorter and the opportunities for change harder to find.

Part of the problem for female stars today is that the filmmaking process no longer gives primary consideration to how often the audience is shown a beautiful woman (or man, for that matter) in luminous backlit close-ups. Such shots were once basics in the

grammar of movie language—now they are rare. In a 1930s movie like *The Crusades*, Loretta Young was ethereally lit to suggest purity, radiance, desirability, and, of course, to showcase her uncommon female beauty. Not only did her close-up enhance her star power, it also supported the meaning of the story in which Young does, in fact, play a virtuous queen whose noble self-sacrifice makes a better Christian (but more important, a sexier man) out of King Richard (Henry Wilcoxon). Women like this are not fashionable today, and neither are the stories they enhanced. Even the highly erotic female close-ups of the 1940s are rare. Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* or Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* or Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*—all were shot in erotically glamorous close-ups, each one moving in on a man to lure, seduce. No one who saw these images—or sees them now—discounts their power. Turner and Hayworth are luscious, lips parted, eyes flashing, every inch the Hollywood star. Stanwyck plays it more remote, colder, reflecting her proper status as an actress rather than a glamour queen. Stanwyck's close-up presents her almost as a character actress. Such cinematic attention to building the female image, and to linking the audience (both male and female) to her, does not occur in the same way today.

The biggest female star of the recent era is Julia Roberts. Unlike many others, Roberts has endured. She has risen higher than any of her competitors, from onetime strong contender Michelle Pfeiffer (who has not only stopped working but been completely forgotten) to more recent pretenders such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Halle Berry, two former Oscar winners who faded fast. Roberts has outlasted them all, and unless she decides to end her career in order to raise her children, she may well outlast another generation of actresses, too.*

Although Roberts does not invoke any specific golden era star, she has become our only modern female legend of their wattage. Also like them, she grows into who the audience wants her to be over the years as her career unfolds and her persona becomes bigger than any vessel created to contain it. Like the mature Joan Crawford or Lana Turner, Roberts now completely dominates any film in

which she appears. At first, she was a sweet ingenue in *Mystic Pizza* (1988) and *Steel Magnolias* (1989), and then a hooker with a heart of gold in *Pretty Woman* (1990). She rapidly segued into a plucky-career-girl phase with *Flatliners* (1990), *The Pelican Brief* (1993), and the unsuccessful *I Love Trouble* (1994), taking time out along the way to make her mark in relationship dramas by playing a runaway battered wife (*Sleeping with the Enemy* [1991]) and the nurse of a dying man (*Dying Young* [1991]). She moved around the chessboard from betrayed wife to meddling friend to intruding stepmother (*Something to Talk About* [1995], *My Best Friend's Wedding* [1997], *Stepmom* [1998]) and also essayed two unsuccessful period pieces, *Mary Reilly* (1996) and *Michael Collins* (1996). She learned from those later failures and took it upon herself from that time forward to become “the Contemporary Woman” (her *type*). Thus, she is successful because she has found the neo-star zen point between type and variety: She basically makes only one film—a story about a contemporary female experience with an emphasis on relationships—and plays only one character, her contemporary female. But within that territory, she has astonishing range. She can play cute, icy, daffy, sexy, ballbusting, and jealous, upscale, downscale, without becoming defined by any one of them. In a sense, Julia Roberts, the ultimate modern female star, is possibly the ultimate modern female actor. She has displayed a flexibility from film to film that Meryl Streep can only envy, playing the formerly fat, overshadowed sister of a movie star in *America's Sweethearts* (2001), and the movie star herself in *Notting Hill* (1999). For most actresses, one or the other of those roles would be “going against type,” but anything *contemporary* is Roberts's type. Never drawing attention to herself as an actor (she made only one deliberate—and successful—bid for an Oscar by playing the crusading *Erin Brockovich* [2000]), Roberts has nonetheless proved herself to be one at a very high level. Oddly enough, however, Roberts the neo-star has created a career for herself that is exactly like the career she would have probably had under the studio system. Her career illustrates how things may have changed artistically for men, but not necessarily for women.*

Nicole Kidman suggests Grace Kelly in her pale thinness, hauteur, and seemingly inbred sense of class. Although she is thought of as a versatile “great actress” (she put on a false nose to win an Oscar for *The Hours* [2002]), she has usually stuck to playing upper-class, sheltered, or highly professional women. The screenwriter Simon Kinberg notes, “Something feels a little brittle about her, and in an interesting way.” Some of her “brittle women” are naturally reserved, some are high-strung and sensitive, some are repressed, and some simply don’t have time for anything but fighting the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the post-Soviet era (as with her Dr. Julia Kelly in *The Peacemaker* [1997]). Her women are not spontaneous. The less sympathetic ones are controlling and even calculating (as in *To Die For*, where she plays a woman who seduces teenage boys and manipulates them into murdering her husband).^{*} They all tend to have an air of superiority. Indeed, the remake of *The Stepford Wives* (2004) hinges upon Kidman’s ability to outshine Matthew Broderick as her husband, thus causing him to punish her by having her turned into a robot. In general Kidman’s characters, almost like those of a similar male “blond god,” Robert Redford, do not reveal all their secrets. (George Cukor once said that when it came to real stars, “there’s always something about them that you’d like to know.” In other words, some little secret you feel only *you* will locate.) Audiences like Kidman’s ladylike stance, sensing that her real story lies elsewhere. She keeps her own counsel, and thus, like Roberts, has a neo-stardom that is actually no more than a single old-fashioned type that puts on different hats (or noses) to go all serious when necessary. Kidman takes few real chances with her stardom.

Sandra Bullock’s stardom is really an old-fashioned one. She’s like some strange amalgamation of Donna Reed, June Allyson, and Betty Hutton. She’s ordinary, or so we imagine: a star who can really connect to her audience. She’s mined the field of “women’s film” in all its variations, but the thing that marks her out is that she has her own production company and drives her own career forward. Her neo-stardom is thus shaped by an option the studio system women longed to have but could never achieve: Bullock runs

her own show. As an actress, she frequently plays women who are marked or flawed in some way. In *28 Days* (2000) she plays a serious, unglamorized alcoholic (not in the sense that she looks like hell, but in the sense that for almost the whole movie she is truly selfish and uncaring). In *Hope Floats* (1998) she is a former beauty queen who comes home in disgrace to be humiliated by everyone she stepped on in high school. In *While You Were Sleeping* (1995), *The Net* (1995), *Miss Congeniality* (2000), and the dark noir *Murder by Numbers* (2002), she plays lonely, isolated, unkempt women who have given up somehow and who are deeply estranged from their own femininity. Even Bullock's non-neurotic, well-dressed Ellen Roark in *A Time to Kill* is still a lonely crusader, someone who is obsessed with ending the death penalty instead of finding fulfillment.[†] If Bullock had been active during the age of the star machine, she probably would have wanted to play Bette Davis's role as the disappointed spinster Charlotte Vale in *Now, Voyager*, but more likely would have been assigned to the Ann Sheridan "good girl" role in *King's Row* (1942). (Bullock lacks Davis's rage, although she could clearly have connected to the deprivation and the loneliness.)

However, Bullock's characters are not tragic. Their unhappiness is poignant, not crushing. Most of her films have a relatively gentle tone, and they usually end happily. Many people do not even perceive the ugly-duckling aspect of Bullock's work. In a way, they're not supposed to. When Bullock does play an unhappy woman, her open face, friendly eyes, and fundamental optimism signal us that the character's unhappiness is not the whole story. There are other possibilities. The movie thus gains an inherent depth that validates Bullock's stardom and links her to the great women's film stars of the past. Of all the female neo-stars, Bullock is the one most likely to have had a similar career in the old system.

Angelina Jolie, however, is the one who can generate the excitement of a real movie star, appearing week after week on the covers of fanzines like *In Touch* and *The Star*. She's the modern Lana Turner because her filmography is not really the source of her fame.

Taking Lives (2004), *Beyond Borders* (2003), *Life or Something Like It* (2002), *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004). Despite winning the Best Supporting Actress Oscar in 2000 for *Girl, Interrupted*, Jolie has an overall filmography that is less than stellar. She is famous because the fanzines need to write about *someone*, so it might as well be a genuinely charismatic woman who has, over the years, married and divorced very young (to first and second husbands Jonny Lee Miller and Billy Bob Thornton); publicly kissed her brother a little too hard; admitted to cutting herself; made vague references to drugs; dated a woman; expressed a yearning to be “taken down” by a suitably dominant individual of either gender; declared a willingness to try bondage; wore a vial of second husband Thornton’s blood (and divorced him amid allegations of his insatiable sex addiction); announced that she satisfies her postdivorce sexual needs by having flings with men in motels; adopted a boy from Cambodia, a boy from Vietnam, and a girl from Ethiopia; allegedly delivered the deathblow to Brad Pitt’s staggering marriage to Jennifer Aniston; conceived Pitt’s child; given birth; and, in the middle of all this, found time to undertake a genuine and serious mission for the United Nations on behalf of the world’s children. Fans don’t *need* to watch her films. Jolie, like a rock star, *lives* her type. Her roles are only pale imitations of her offscreen self. If Jolie’s drama is all a put-on, and one hopes for her sake that it is, it’s the shrewdest choice she could have made.

Jolie is a mix of two classic Hollywood types rarely seen today: the sex symbol and the “exaggerated woman” of old-time female melodrama. In the alleged age of female liberation, the celluloid descendants of fearsome and titanic women once played by Crawford and Davis and Stanwyck have all been safely straitjacketed away. There are not many leading roles in major films anymore for such types. In the old days, Jolie could have found steady work playing larger-than-life, even terrifying female characters. Today, she has to become one herself. Contemporary “exaggerated women” in movies lack a clearly defined genre sphere in which to set their stories. On screen, they are, more than ever,

accessories to men. It is not a cultural accident that Jolie's one serious, Oscar-winning role was that of a mental patient.

Jolie's job appears to be to bring dangerous insanity to moviegoers inside a desirable package. A perfect example is her role as the unhinged Olympias in Oliver Stone's 2004 *Alexander*. Although the movie was unquestionably a failure, Jolie gave it some much-needed pizzazz, gamely shouting out such lines as "The blood of Achilles runs through my veins" so effectively that no one could doubt it. In one memorable moment, she's knocked onto her knees by her husband's violence and lets loose with a wordless, truly primal roar of defiance. Any actress takes a large risk with such a scene—it's a moment ripe for ridicule—but Jolie plays it so fearlessly that she clarifies an important aspect of Stone's vision for the film: Olympias is Alexander. *She's* the one with the world conqueror vision. He's the one who has to do what Mommy wants. What other actress today could pull off Jolie's frustrated Macedonian stay-at-home mom who wanted a career? She's both hot and sinister—and a performer uninhibited by any cinematic disaster surrounding her.

Jolie represents the antidote to WASPy would-be Grace Kellys like Gwyneth Paltrow, opposite whom she was cast in 2004's *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*. Like matter and antimatter, Paltrow and Jolie are in visual contrast on-screen. Paltrow is pale, rather cold, and an ordinary woman (or at least she tries to pass for one). Jolie is the anti-Paltrow. Like the vamps of the silent screen—the Pola Negris and the Theda Baras—she cannot and should not play normal. "She stalks through films entirely on her own terms," says Roger Ebert, and Jolie herself has the last word: "I'm capable of being stronger and darker and fiercer than anybody's ever written." Offscreen, she has also stalked through life and the pressures of real-life celebrity, standing up for causes she cares about, and generally taking charge of the publicity insanity surrounding her. Her father, actor Jon Voight, confirms her strength and confidence: "What do movie stars do with all that success, money, white-hot spotlight and fame? It's distortion...an unnatural state...but Angie has found a

way. She's overcoming it with causes. Investing her celebrity to help others."

More than any other actor or actress, the concept of the modern "neo-star" is exemplified by Tom Cruise, an all-purpose superstar and, to date, a truly durable box office champion. Cruise has put together a remarkable career that has made maximum usage of the alternating neo-star format. He makes blockbuster hits that appeal to mass audiences, smaller films that challenge his acting ability (and he's met those challenges), and crowd-pleasing character-driven comedies (*Jerry Maguire* [1996]). Now in his forties (he's forty-five in 2007), Cruise still has a boyish grin full of flashing teeth (not since Burt Lancaster have we had a set of star choppers like his). He's lean and mean, and never forgets to deliver his trademark: a little impish cock of his head. Although he's actually been around for a long time, having first been really noticed over twenty years ago in 1983's *Risky Business*, he doesn't look a day older than he did in his first movies. (He made his film debut in 1981 in Franco Zeffirelli's version of *Endless Love*, starring Brooke Shields. *Leonard Maltin's Movie Guide* says *Endless Love* "is rightfully regarded as one of the worst films of its time.") He moved into big-time stardom with *Top Gun* in 1986, playing a cheeky brat of a military hero—just the type that American moviegoers always like.

As his career unfolded, Cruise seemed to understand instinctively how to be a movie star. Asked by an interviewer whether audiences see him as an actor or as a star, he gave the perfect neo-star answer: "It really doesn't matter to me... actor? movie star? I just do it." In truth, there does seem to be no Method angst in his performances. He takes a straightforward approach the way the old male stars—the Gables, the Coopers, the John Waynes—tended to do. He's just *there* on screen. Because he's always been willing to play in junk (try *Cocktail* from 1988 or *Days of Thunder* from 1990), it is sometimes forgotten what a really distinguished career he's put together. Even more important, it's often overlooked that Tom Cruise has played second gun to more great screen legends than any other male star of our time and held his own. He was strong alongside Paul Newman in *The Color of Money* (1986), confident and equal with Dustin

Hoffman in *Rain Man* (1988), and unintimidated by Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men* (1992). His passionate, let-it-all-hang-out performance as a disillusioned Vietnam veteran in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) was Oscar-worthy, and so was his *Magnolia* (1999) supporting role as what Leonard Maltin has called “a Pied Piper of satyrdom.” No one mixes a deeper level of serious acting challenge with a sillier level of mindless action (as in *Mission Impossible I* [1996], *II* [2000], and *III* [2006]). He pushes the boundaries of neo-stardom out to the edge, farther than any other movie star of our current era.*

By the beginning of 2006, Cruise was the single most successful box office movie star of his era, but trouble was brewing. Cruise had been brilliant at manipulating his own star machine. A good businessman, he got approval over all the marketing material connected to his films and was famous for being smart about how to sell himself. But in 2005 he fired his publicist, Pat Kingsley, and replaced her with his own sister, Lee Anne DeVette. Today, stars need professional protection more than ever. The media is aggressive, and whereas once only fan magazines and the Hollywood trades really covered show business, now every possible source of information covers it: the Internet, TV shows, tabloids, the trades, upscale magazines, and newspapers—even *The New York Times* puts show business trivia on its front pages and covers everything in its business pages as well as arts sections. On his own, without professional protection, he began a series of “personal” decisions: He promoted his private interest in Scientology; he criticized Brooke Shields’s decision to take antidepressants for her postpartum problems; he announced his passion for the young actress Katie Holmes, and confirmed it by jumping on Oprah Winfrey’s couch, a space usually reserved for a more solemn sort of revelation. The backlash against Cruise was immediate. The press criticized him for being bullying and inflammatory about Shields, for concocting his relationship with Holmes for publicity (on their first date he fed her sushi while they cruised over L.A. in his private jet),* and for, at the very least, possibly being unhinged in front of

the Great Oprah (who remained admirably calm during his demonstration).

Suddenly, show business was rocked when Sumner Redstone—CEO of Viacom, the parent company for Paramount, Cruise’s releasing company—blabbed to *The Wall Street Journal* that he was terminating the studio’s long-term agreement with Cruise because of the megastar’s alleged “erratic behavior.” Redstone added, “As much as we like him personally, we thought it was wrong to renew his deal. His recent conduct has not been acceptable to Paramount.” Cruise as Fatty Arbuckle? No one knew what to think, but Cruise’s company (which he partners with Paula Wagner) immediately informed the media that they had broken off negotiations with Paramount more than a week earlier and were setting up their own independent operation. No one in Hollywood worried much about who was telling the truth—the issue was what it might mean for Tom Cruise’s future. When Cruise and Wagner announced they would take over and run the newly revived United Artists operation, insiders realized that Cruise had given himself full control of his own career. He couldn’t be counted out just because Paramount was mad at him, and he’s still very much a player in the game.

Although Cruise was still one of the biggest moneymakers of his time—his summer 2005 film, *War of the Worlds*, was a hit—his fans began to grumble and the business began to rumble: Mother of Mercy, was this the end of little Tommy? In a *People* magazine poll, 62 percent of readers declared the Holmes-Cruise romance was a “publicity stunt.” The editors pronounced it was all “publicity” and *Us Weekly* added their coup de grâce: Out of every hundred people passing through Rockefeller Center, sixty-five said it was all just “pr.” Cruise had made the mistake of thinking he could control his own image, but seemingly he righted his ship just in time as he pulled back and temporarily disappeared out of the press. He stabilized by marrying Holmes and becoming a father to their baby daughter, two well-publicized events that might return him to favor. Nevertheless, he continues to be ridiculed and criticized in the media. Tom Cruise has had to face the age-old bottom line of

stardom: If he blows it with moviegoers, they will turn him out of the box office.*

Stardom has never been easy. Glamorous, yes, lucrative, yes, but easy, no. And, as *The New York Times* chronicled for readers in March 2006, when it comes to a concrete indicator of whether you're there or not, take a look at the Hollywood star maps that are sold on street corners: "You're either on or you're off."† Real stardom has to know itself. "I'm Mother Courage," Elizabeth Taylor once said. "I'll be dragging my sable coat behind me unto old age." (And she was only forty at the time!)

Today the business seems to be losing confidence in movie stars: "The comfort level of hiring a star isn't what it used to be," says Jim Gianopulos, the chairman of Fox. "I think people have recognized that there's a folly in allowing yourself to fall prey to the expectation that talent will always recover its value in the kinds of numbers we're playing with." (Louis B. Mayer can easily be imagined saying the very opposite in 1940.) Gianopulos's opinions, however, seem to be verified somewhat by audiences, who are increasingly turning their backs on movies that are star-driven. "There's a shrinking number of dramatic stars who can guarantee an opening weekend audience," says Ron Meyer, president of Universal and a former agent. "They must be in the right vehicle at the right time." The difference is that in the past a star had to be in the right vehicle at the right time to *become* a star.

When Terry Press, the head of marketing at DreamWorks, was asked the age-old question "Can marketing create a movie star?" she gave an answer partly worthy of Louis B. Mayer's day: "No. The public makes a movie star." Then she added a modern-day spin: "Look at Johnny Depp. He's now a gigantic movie star, but he's been a great actor for many years. There was terrific marketing on many of his films, but it took *Pirates of the Caribbean* to make him a big movie star. The audience spoke." Thus, in the old system you became a movie star and hoped you could have a chance to develop into an actor. Now you become an actor and hope that marketing—that is, a blockbuster hit film—can turn you into a movie star. The

system has inverted, but the bottom line still stands: You need the audience, the right film, the accident of fate, the marketing. Not all that much has really changed.

Pundits are now claiming that the time of the star has passed. Even people inside the film business are predicting the “starless” movie of the future.* Does that mean Tom Cruise will be the last of the red-hot movie stars? It’s doubtful. Probably all that will change, besides their salaries, is *who* they are, *what* they play in, and *how* the public wants to see them.

Whether the star machine works them or they work the star machine, what is unequivocally true about the creation of movie stars then and now is this: It’s a mysterious process. And nobody can define it. It’s still a mixture of the objective (business breaks, roles, publicity) and the subjective (whether or not the audience sees something in you they want). Movie stardom is still—and will always be—half-calculated and half-serendipitous. Halle Berry, a veteran survivor of audience whims and Hollywood’s own mercurial attitudes—as well as someone who had the odds stacked against her as a black woman—explained what an actor has to do to become a star when there’s no longer a studio-generated machine to help: “You keep trying, keep throwing it up against the wall. You don’t quit with one failure, or one success, or rest on laurels.”

As today’s movie actors keep on trying, they can hold on to what former Disney chairman Michael Eisner said about the audience’s attitude toward movie stars: “They like to see them. They like to think they can look like them. They like to think they could live like them...[Stars] are part of the charisma of the business.” In other words, people need movie stars. And they know one when they see one.

* As mentioned earlier, the studio system that created and used the star system collapsed by the end of the 1950s, brought down by a series of issues. See Bibliography.

† Eastwood is a business hybrid: the wedding of the old system to the new. Two other stars who began in the studio era, Jack Lemmon and Paul Newman, also made the transition but were not developed by the studio star school system.

* By 1980, there is only one name associated with the former system, Clint Eastwood. The other male stars are Redford and Hoffman, along with Burt Reynolds (who was number 1), John Travolta, and Steve Martin. Over the years, Hoffman would prove exceptionally durable, as both star and actor. The *Los Angeles Times* dubbed him “the accidental movie star...the short, big-nosed actor who, in his own words, ‘plummeted to stardom.’” Although people tend to think of this time frame as one in which there are no roles for women, there are four women on the list: Streisand, Jane Fonda, Sally Field, Sissy Spacek. Within ten years, not a single one of these names will be repeated, and the entire new list are names not developed in any form of the star machine: Jack Nicholson, Tom Cruise, Robin Williams, Michael Douglas, Tom Hanks, Michael J. Fox, Eddie Murphy, Mel Gibson, Sean Connery, and Kathleen Turner.

* The role of the agent in the star’s life has changed dramatically from the old system in which an agent referred his/her client to studio executives who then decided whether or not to offer a contract. The agent’s duty ended there. Today the agent has become the entity who manages the talent, often having a large control of the star’s future but presumably acting specifically on the star’s behalf.

* Affleck, once an A-list star and former Oscar winner for co-authoring the screenplay of 1997’s *Good Will Hunting* (with Matt Damon), said of modern celebrity: “There’s no guide to it. That’s why you see so many train wrecks.”

† Without an efficient studio system turning out movies rapidly, it now takes longer and longer to make a movie. This can tie an actor up for an inordinate amount of time, and if that movie fails, the actor has wasted time. Thus, a single film can destroy a career, especially a beginning one, more than ever before.

‡ McConaughey has not yet reached the Newman legend level, and the irony is that Newman himself is still working. (Even more ironic is the fact that Newman was never hailed as the “new” anybody, although he was royally panned in his film debut, *The Silver Chalice*, 1954, and dubbed “a fake Marlon Brando.” Adding to this progression of mistaken understandings, after Brando became fat and risky, Newman surpassed him in longevity.)

* *People’s* “Sexiest Man Alive” awards are the Oscars of physical appeal. Beginning in 1985, the winners have been Mel Gibson; 1986, Mark Harmon; 1987, Harry Hamlin; 1988, John F. Kennedy Jr. (the only non-film winner); 1989, Sean Connery; 1990, Tom Cruise; 1991, Patrick Swayze; 1992, Nick Nolte; 1993, Richard Gere and Cindy Crawford as sexiest couple; 1994, no winner; 1995, Brad Pitt; 1996, Denzel Washington; 1997, George Clooney; 1998, Harrison Ford; 1999, Richard Gere; 2000, Brad Pitt; 2001, Pierce Brosnan;

2002, Ben Affleck; 2003, Johnny Depp; 2004, Jude Law; 2005, Matthew McConaughey; 2006, George Clooney.

† In mid-2006, *Entertainment Weekly* relabeled McConaughey as “the Tom Hanks of the aughties.” He’d progressed but was still a star being defined by other stars.

* This “I am an actor not a type” stance can become absurd. Witness Renée Zellweger proving her versatility by tapping her guts out in a musical (*Chicago*), then playing a “backwoods gal” in *Cold Mountain* (2003) right before she reprises her screwball comedy identity as Bridget Jones—all to prove there’s no “Renée Zellweger type”—which we all knew anyway. (And we call this progress.)

* Other things have stayed the same, too. Meryl Streep commented, “People want to put you in a box,” and Dustin Hoffman pointed out that “at a certain point your life becomes a fiction...When you get famous, people change, you change, your family changes...” Nicole Kidman complained, “I think it’s very hard to be an actor or actress. It’s very easy to get corrupted.” Any of these comments could have been made during the years of the studio system.

† This accessibility is further complicated by college film classes, which are creating a skewed, revisionist sense of stardom among the young. Because many of these courses are about westerns or film noirs, students see actors such as Dana Andrews and Victor Mature more often than they do Ronald Colman or Charles Boyer or even Clark Gable. An actress like Maureen O’Hara, popular but not top tier in her own day, is highly recognizable to college students because she was John Wayne’s leading lady and appeared in movies directed by masters such as John Ford. She also is the star of the perennial Christmas favorite *Miracle on Thirty-fourth Street* (1947), as well as Hitchcock’s *Jamaica Inn* (1939), the Dorothy Arzner feminist favorite, *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940), Sam Peckinpah’s early cult film *The Deadly Companions* (1961), Renoir’s American wartime *This Land Is Mine* (1943), and auteurist favorites such as *Buffalo Bill* (1944, William Wellman), *The Spanish Main* (1945, Frank Borzage), *A Woman’s Secret* (1949, Nicholas Ray), and *The Magnificent Matador* (1955, Budd Boetticher). She was also the mature star of the Hayley Mills Disney classic *The Parent Trap* (1961) and the leading lady for an older Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Hobbs Takes a Vacation* (1962) and Henry Fonda in *Spencer’s Mountain* (1963). As if that weren’t enough she has also appeared opposite John Candy in *Only the Lonely* (1991) and as the star of two TV movies. O’Hara has outlived everyone, and her career in retrospect is an amazing one that has guaranteed her a more solid place in movie history than anyone ever thought she’d earned. Time has its own way of dealing with movie stardom.

* In old Hollywood, Jeremy Irons could never have turned into a Cary Grant once he had played von Bülow. Irons would have become typed forever as a ritzy villain. He would have become George Sanders—or maybe Clifton Webb.

* He can also sing and dance, and no doubt the old Hollywood system would have been happy to put him under contract as an all-purpose Cesar Romero. (If they were going to try to turn him into a leading man, they probably would have changed his name.)

* Brando and Depp appeared together in a wonderfully roguish movie called *Don Juan de Marco* in 1995.

* Brendan Fraser's problem is that he has *not* yet nailed down his "role" half of stardom.

* The names mentioned here are only some of the possibilities: Will Smith (thought by many to be the biggest superstar for the future), Richard Gere (moving into a new area of respect from critics), Jim Carrey (the Danny Kaye of today), Heath Ledger, Jake Gyllenhaal, Vince Vaughn, the Wilson brothers; for the women, Gwyneth Paltrow (Miss Quality Player of 1998, although the public never really bought into her), Goldie Hawn, Meg Ryan, Renée Zellweger, Reese Witherspoon, and on and on. The ones discussed are samples. Others could have been chosen. Many star names came and went—and came and went again—over the 1960–1980 time period: Sally Field, Bette Midler, Jane Fonda, Sissy Spacek, Cher, Liza Minnelli, Shirley MacLaine, John Travolta, Eddie Murphy, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Michael Douglas, Robin Williams, Tom Hanks, Michael J. Fox, Sidney Poitier, Charles Bronson, Denzel Washington, Kevin Costner, and many others.

* Ford is now scheduled for a new Indiana Jones feature, which could put him back at the top of the box office.

* He won Best Supporting Actor.

* By the end of 2006, in January 2007, the final rankings (from *Hollywood Reporter*) were Nicole Kidman, Reese Witherspoon, Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz, Halle Berry, Charlize Theron, Angelina Jolie, Kirsten Dunst, and Jennifer Aniston. Roberts, Zellweger, and Foster were off; Berry, who had been bumped from the 2005 list, was back on; Dunst had turned up.

† Other contenders might be Sandra Bullock (who had been on the list in 2005) and Jennifer Lopez (also a 2005 entry), or possibly Scarlett Johansson (a throwback to a Lana Turner type, but with an edge), or the versatile Naomi Watts.

‡ Cruise's having won the number-one spot for seven years is huge. The number-one spot was won five times each by Clint Eastwood, Burt Reynolds, and Bing Crosby, his runners-up in this honor.

* At the current point, Roberts has opted to remove herself from the competition in order to focus on marriage and motherhood, as well as an attempt at a New York stage career. She remains, however, a big name in the tabloids and is still considered a big box office draw anytime she chooses to make a film. Time will tell what direction her career will take her.

* She has continued to work in the relationship dramas (*Closer* [2004]) and light comedies (*Notting Hill*, *America's Sweethearts*) that brought her success throughout the 1990s.

* In the trifecta of woman's film misery sweepstakes, *The Human Stain* (2003), Kidman's character has run away from a sexually abusive stepfather, married a crazy Vietnam veteran, and watched her children burn up in a fire.

† Bullock really tries to stretch. It has recently come to light that she initially wanted to make Clint Eastwood's 2004 triumph *Million Dollar Baby* herself and play the role of boxer Maggie Fitzgerald.

* Michael Mann, who directed Cruise in *Collateral* (2004), said of him: "I never worked with a bigger star who was more up for subverting what people think about him."

* The backlash also hit Holmes. One newspaper featured an ugly close-up photo of her that revealed a skin rash around her mouth. "Katie's Lip Malfunction!" screamed the headlines.

* From his arrival at the top after *Risky Business*, Cruise starred in ten movies that went over the top in box office receipts, frequently despite bad reviews: *Top Gun* (\$176.8 million), *Rain Man* (\$172.8 million), *A Few Good Men* (\$141.3 million), *The Firm* (\$158.3 million), *Interview with the Vampire* (\$105.3 million), *Mission: Impossible* (\$181 million), *Jerry Maguire* (\$154 million), *Mission Impossible: II* (\$215.4 million), *Minority Report* (\$132 million), *The Last Samurai* (\$111.1 million), and *War of the Worlds* (\$234.3 million). Even a movie that the critics roasted, *Vanilla Sky*, in 2001, made \$100.6 million—and in it Cruise was playing a fundamentally unlikable character. However, *Mission Impossible III* underperformed, earning \$82 million less than its predecessor, but still pulling in triple digits. Cruise's box office power was questioned over figures that were huge by comparison to others'.

† At that time, some new names on the star maps journey were those of Dr. Phil and musician Axl Rose. Names that had long since been eliminated were Don Ameche, Nancy Sinatra, and Fred MacMurray, and—shockingly—names that had been recently eliminated included Loretta Young and Cary Grant. It's a hard-knocks map universe, although comfort can be taken that Marlene Dietrich, Frank Sinatra, and Walt Disney seem to be enduring no matter what.

* The debate is ongoing. One week, Stephen King's *Entertainment Weekly* column can state flatly, "Star power is a myth,...statistics prove it is nothing but a lie." In a subsequent issue, the same magazine quotes producer Brian Grazer as saying, "We're in a world where stars appear to not have the same power they once had...and then something like this [the star-driven 2006 movie *Inside Man*] proves that they [can still do it]. It's a validation of their bankability."

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